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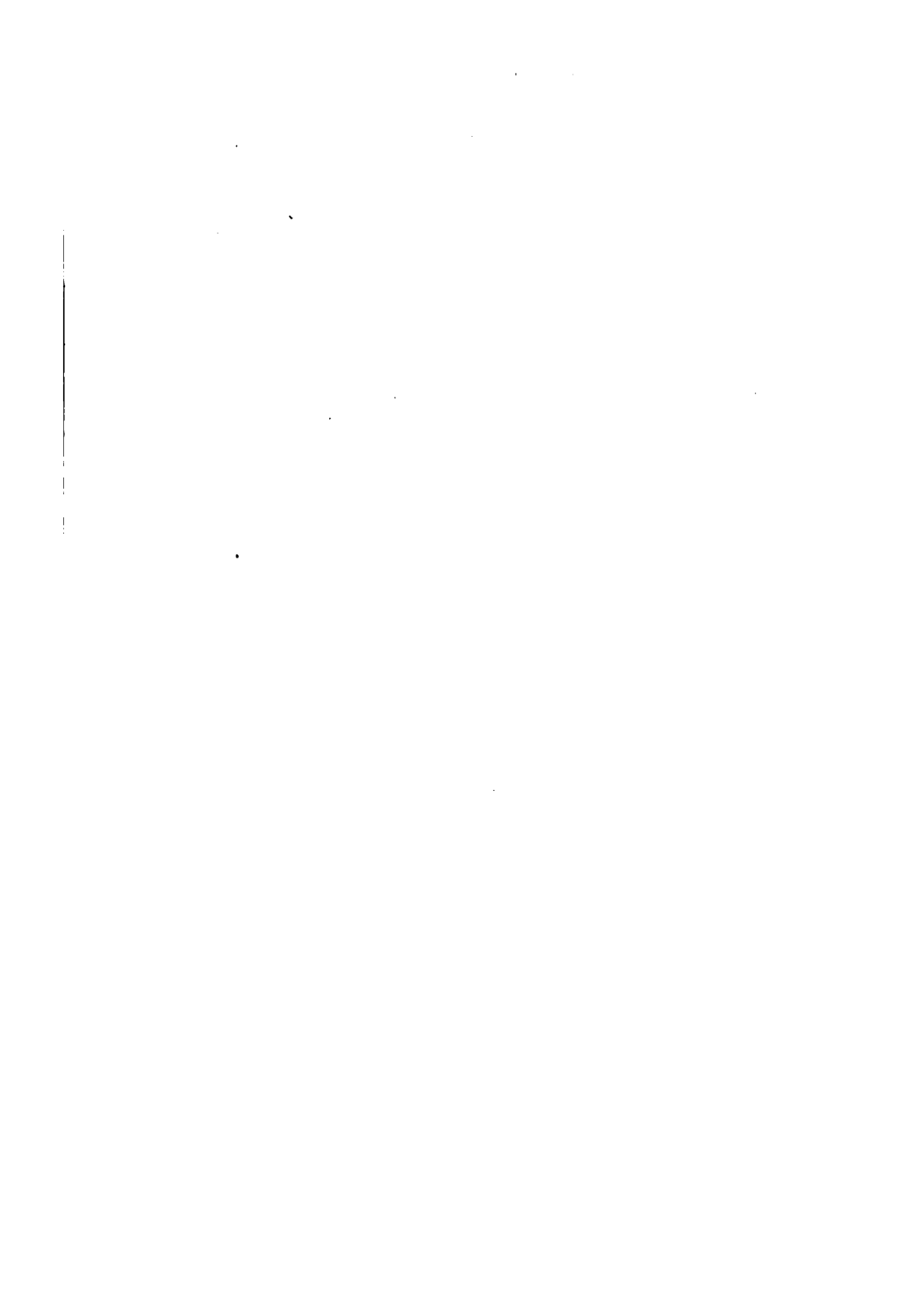
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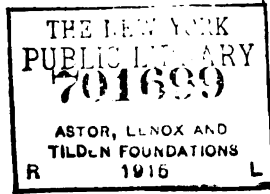
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KEREN OF LOWBOLE

KEREN OF LOWBOLE

CHAPTER I

OF THE COMING OF MASTERTON TO LOWBOLE

MASTERTON came to Lowbole on a day at the end of February.

At twilight Keren blew the fire for her father, Thomas Ashe—that Ashe who is said to have been descended from Dr. Dee, the mathematician and astrologer to Queen Elizabeth. They were in the stone room; a large room with flagged floor and vaulted roof, the hall or guard-room of the old building on the ruins of which the Grange, itself not young, had been built. The place was furnished now with implements of the Hermetic Arts, alembics and crucibles and hydra-necked retorts with other vessels of strange use and design; in the recesses were furnaces, some of iron, others but clay built upon old hearths. On shelves and ledges of the masonry were bottles and phials of many sizes containing elements, the thick, the moist and the dry, in all their forms, and liquors, muddy or clear, which winked back the light of the fire. On a high shelf by themselves three bottles stood; each stoppered closely and covered with bladder to keep out the air, each marked with the name *Ultio* dimly to be seen in the glow of the furnace just below. This one furnace was the only one to-night in full glow; Keren knelt before it keeping it at even heat by bellows deftly applied and fuel cautiously fed; watching, the while, the liquor in the glass vessel, from which, at intervals something slower than heart beat, bubbles rose.

Outside the rain fell; the soft sound of it and of the

soaking of the earth joined with the occasional pant of the bellows and the low steady roar of the fire. But in a while Keren heard another sound, a small sound without (she had the hearing of a hare—and something of its fleetness, though otherwise not the qualities of that animal).

"Some one comes," she said, though without taking her eyes from the flask or her hand from the bellows.

"Ah?" her father answered, and he too did not take his eyes from his task. He was measuring red oil of sulphur from a phial drop by drop; he did not cease from it, though that of which she gave notice was an unusual thing. It was rare for one to seek out the solitary house; rare, one would have thought, for any to be abroad in such weather.

Nevertheless Keren was not mistaken. In a little some one knocked on the outer door.

Ashe went to it, having finished measuring the liquor; but Keren knelt where she was, attentive to her task. She had been bred up to think that the operations of the Art were as the commands of any other divinity and admitted of no half service; also she had a more than common share of the woman's faculty of knowing what passed without the rude necessity of over-much staring. Though she never fairly looked round, she knew almost so soon as her father that he who was revealed by the opening of the door was a man in the prime of manhood; a stranger who, rain-sodden though he was, showed signs of means and breeding in dress and manner.

He had come seeking direction it seemed; he and the party he was with, Sir James Belton and my Lady Belton and some two or three servants, were in difficulties. My lady's coach was in the slough a short quarter mile from the door, and they were all astray, by whose fault the servants did not agree. At all events there they were, night closing in, the rain falling as it had fallen these two hours, the Forest tracks appearing each as the other and all as dark as the mouth of the Pit, and a deal worse going than we are led to think that way, at least in the earlier stages. The servants were in despair, Sir James in a temper and

my lady in pain—she was in the early days of hope for an heir, the first time since her marriage two years ago. This, or such part of it as was to the purpose, was conveyed by the ambassador, who named himself Masterton and Sir James' cousin.

Ashe heard him out and gave answer.

"As to where you are," he said, "the Grange at Lowbole; though for that knowledge, I fear, you are not the wiser, nor the better off. There is no Lowbole, the village has not been within man's memory, the inn, if there ever was such, long since swallowed by the Forest; this is the sole house for far. As to how you came; certainly by mistake, we are on the road to nowhere. As to what were best to be done; remain till daylight, you would scarce find the way in the dark and the lady, I think, would not thank you to try."

The last, at least, was to the purpose and likely what Masterton had looked for when he came on his errand, nevertheless he courteously demurred—he had pleasing manners and a deep voice that softened—with deference becomingly.

"There are the three of us," he protested, "besides my lady's woman and the men."

"The house is largish," Ashe answered; "you can be accommodated if you are content to fare simply. We are plain folk, but you are welcome, and the lady certainly would do worse by going further."

Masterton thought the same and accepted the offer gratefully.

"Keren," Ashe said, "tell Joan company is coming."

The liquor in the vessel was boiling fast now, the fire in condition to be left untended a while; had it been otherwise Keren knew the household might have waited for the news. As it was, she rose and, without a glance towards the stranger, went from the room.

Joan, to whom she went with her father's message, was the widow of a cleric dispossessed in some of the religious troubles of the late times. A worthy soul, compelled, in this her age, to earn a pittance as she could, and so come

to the household of Thomas Ashe, and thankful to have found that not unpeaceful haven. The news Keren brought her was almost the first of its kind in all the time of her dwelling here; company at Lowbole was almost as rare as snow in harvest; at first she could hardly believe her ears.

"Coming?" she queried—"company coming—great folks? What is it ye say?"

"They will be here soon," Keren said. She had a singular quiet voice, an excellent thing in women, though somewhat deceptive. "So soon, I suppose, as they can get the lady through the mud. We must get ready—the blue room, I think, for the lady."

Joan got to her feet; whether she understood or not there was work for her to do. She ever rose to a household matter; were she told the twelve apostles were at the door she would forget the fluster of the strangeness did one put it to her that guest chambers and a suitable meal must be prepared.

"The blue room?" she said. "Yes, certainly the blue room, a fine room enough, though a little frayed. We must have fires, we must air beds. Linen too. The keys of the closet? Where are my keys? Come, girl, you can help; I've a dozen ways to go."

She spoke as if the whole circumstance and direction were hers and Keren a reluctant novice pressed to ignorant service. Soon she was cluttering about the house, giving orders to the maid and the man, who were the sole other members of the household, bustling here and hastening there, giving Keren a dozen instructions, some of which were obeyed and some not.

The blue room was prepared for my lady, with a pallet at the foot of the bed for her woman, and the room beyond for Sir James.

"The panel room, I think, for the other," Keren said; "it has ever a pleasant smell of wood."

"A fiddlestick!" Joan retorted. "A chimney not used these twelve months—'twill not draw for a surety—and such draughts in the corners as would serve to turn a mill's

sails! The long room's the only one—I must sleep elsewhere to-night."

And she had her way; though Keren still thought best of the panel room with the smell of wood and the tree (near budding now, for the season was early) hard against the window.

"My lady, of course, will be served in her chamber," Joan said while they got ready, and Keren agreed.

But as it chanced my lady determined otherwise.

That which determined her was Keren who, as became the lady of the house, stood in the hall to receive her when, weary and somewhat muddled, she entered on her husband's arm. Keren came forward, not shy, though she had met none such before, and did what she deemed her part: "If you will follow me, my lady," she said after words of welcome, and led the way up the awkward stairs.

"I trust you will be comfortable here," she said as she opened the blue room door. Then seeing the fire which, early lit, had, in attendance on other things, been forgotten and left to choke, she went to stir it.

My lady, who had sunk into a chair, looked her over. She was very slim and of more than common suppleness; of a complexion dark but extraordinarily fine, and hair black as night and very silky.

"How old are you, child?" the lady asked.

Keren looked round—her eyes in the firelight showing almost tawny, her lips a thread of scarlet, somewhat thin but as red as a pomegranate.

"A little more than seventeen, my lady," she answered.

"I had thought you younger," the lady said, still regarding her. "But—no—" she broke off as if undecided what to say and then half took back what she had said. "You are so—so young, child," she said. "And youth is so fair."

She spoke wistfully, but Keren did not understand. Certainly did not know that it was this which decided the lady to rest while supper was prepared, and then, in spite of weariness, make a toilet and sup below with the others—and Sir James, the most notoriously fickle man of his years.

Keren had little toilet to make; her wardrobe was small and her garments plain, there was little she could do in honour of the occasion. In consequence she admired my lady's toilet much when she saw her at table. Lady Belton was not quite a beauty; there were faults in her features, which Keren perceived, as she also perceived that the colour on her cheeks was not all of Nature's painting; but it was a sweet face and a gentle, with a wistful droop to the lips. It pleased Keren more than Sir James, who sat beside her and paid a compliment now and then. Not so many as my lady had expected, nor did his free glances hold such admiration as she had looked to see. Either he did not find the girl so fair as she had feared or else there was that in her which was discouraging to gallantry.

On the other side of Keren was Masterton. She looked seldom towards him, but she knew precisely how the smile came in his eyes when he spoke; how his face lighted as he bent in deference to herself or my lady, on his right hand or his left. At the far end of the table Ashe sat. It was a long table, indifferently lighted with few candles short in their sockets; Keren could see his hands more plainly than his face. White hands which, with impiety, she used to think in childhood must be like the hands of God, so strong, so fine, so sure; calling to being or destruction, making or breaking without ruth or error or haste.

The room was somewhat dark and mouldersome, with old tapestries dropping from their hangings and a great carven chimney piece, where most of the figures were lost in obscurity, though some one or two stood out sharply. Sir James glanced at it once or twice as if it recalled some half-obliterated memory.

"I have it!" he said at last—"the place Will Bateman came to! The room he spoke of—musty, dark, Dagon or Behemoth or some other carved on the chimney, looking down with folded hands at the old image—"

His eyes rested on Ashe as he broke off, somewhat tardily remembering him of his manners.

"Do I err, learned sir," he asked with over-done courtesy,

"or have I the honour to address him who by some miracle cured my friend Bateman of a singular disease contracted in the East?"

Ashe bowed a partial assent. "I had the fortune to be of some help to a gentleman of that name a while since," he said. "One Ward, a scholar, sent him to me; and having the fortune to understand the humours of his body I was able to resolve them; but there was no miracle, I lay claim to no supernatural powers."

"Powers enough," Sir James answered. "By our Lord! Could you resolve the humours that trouble me and cure the cursed bad luck that overtakes me and all I do, I'd say you'd power enough and to spare!"

"Alas!" Ashe said; "that, I fear, is a task beyond any."

Sir James—he had the face which belongs to a man who puts his pleasure first and all else so far after as to seldom have strength left to attend to it—Sir James raised heavy-lidded eyes at Ashe's words. But the good faith of the speaker was not to be doubted, at least by him: "Am I cursed always to fail?" he asked, though as one contemptuous of the answer.

Ashe spread the fingers of one hand in a way that Keren had seen him use when the material before him was hopeless for the purpose. "Sir," he submitted with deference, "how shall I tell? I am no seer; nor, as I say, can I pretend to supernatural gifts; I am but a humble one of those who ask questions of Nature and are content with the answers."

"Oh?" Sir James said but without heeding; pretensions and philosophies were all one to him and all nothing.

It was my lady who took up the talk here: "Can you not tell us whether Sir James will be successful?" she asked. "Do, I pray, tell me if he will succeed in the enterprise upon which he is about to start. I will tell you what it is, perhaps then you will try. It is to take command of the troops now before a small town in Flanders. Tell me, I pray you, whether he will be successful and"—her voice caught a trifle—"that he will come safely back."

Sir James's lip curled. "Why not ask what is worth the

having?" he sneered. "If you are for soliciting fate and consulting the oracle ask what it's more use to hear. I would not give thanks to one who merely tells what I shall do, I can discover that soon enough for myself."

The lady flushed at the tone, but Ashe entreated the name of the town.

"Reutzberg," she said; "a small place, I am told, I had not before heard of it, nor doubtless you either—"

Ashe bowed, but his hands closed softly on one another. "Sir James goes to take charge of operations there?" he said.

She nodded and Sir James added, "And cares not a jot for the quarrel of either party; and would not pay a groat to know whether or no he succeeds, for he can tell that himself soon enough for all reasonable purpose. So, learned sir, do not wax eloquent on that—unless, of course, it will pleasure my lady."

He yawned a little and turned to Keren. "I should want more than prognostications from my oracle," he said; "I would as soon employ a poet, sooner employ a fair lady"—he glanced gallantly here—"to hymn an event beforehand."

Keren did not answer, but Ashe concurred. "Such an oracle were truly of little use," he said, "though, with permission, he would be possessed of powers stranger than mine. For me—I cannot look into the future; I cannot even to pleasure the lady, foretell whether the commander of the leaguer will be successful or no; my skill goes no further than to give that which would reduce the town."

"What!" Sir James cried; then he laughed, ashamed of his credulity. "'Pon my soul! I had for the moment almost believed him earnest!" he said.

Keren looked up in surprise. "My father never boasts what he cannot do," she said quietly.

Sir James patted her hand as in approval of her daughterliness; and she drew it from under his as a fish slips from touch. He turned to his host. "Yours is a large claim," said he; "that is, if I heard it right."

Ashe repeated his words, though without emphasis or any

apparent desire to establish them. "There is that which would reduce the town," he said; "though the reduction might not be with any great renown to the prowess of the commandant of the leaguer."

Sir James laughed. "Given this magic wherewithal, I'd trust myself for the rest," said he.

It is not clear how much he believed; likely not much, he was a man of little faith, irreligious and a loose liver—though, it must be owned, such are often more given to superstition and the observing of tokens, if not darker practices, than many of higher faith. He had, moreover, before him the case of Bateman, cured of an obscure and noisome disease by the master who lay claim to no supernatural gifts. Certainly the master disclaimed much and did not press that which he did claim, seeming to have small care to be credited, and even smaller to be employed.

Indeed, he rather warned against than urged it. "It is easier to loose than to bind," he said when Sir James pressed him. "There is, as I say, that which will reduce the town; but what else it might do—or if aught else, cannot be foretold."

Sir James was not to be intimidated by that; rather, it and Ashe's reticence stood instead of faith in provoking him.

"Leaving the binding to me," he said, "I will answer for that and for securing all the credit any commander need desire. Do you—or any—but provide the wherewithal for the operation, I will see to it that it is profitably employed."

Ashe offered no contradiction, Keren supposed because he left it in no sort worth while. But Sir James seemed to regard it as acquiescence and discoursed at further length. It may be noted that Ashe supplied nothing really of information or undertaking to the discourse.

At bedtime he thanked his guest for the interest he had been pleased to show his poor science. He also said, should the interest still hold and Sir James find himself disposed and with leisure to hear more in the morning, he would be at his command. With that he ceremoniously escorted him to his chamber and attended till the door closed for the night.

Then he went down to the stone room again.

The distillate of the evening had been done some while, finished before ever he left it to attend his enforced guests (else some one else might have attended them). It was cooled now below the temperature of the blood; the red oil of sulphur, so carefully measured, most perfectly incorporated with the other. It needed no attention from him and he gave it none beyond the careful glance a mother gives to her sleeping children, or some few of learning to the achievements of their art before leaving them for the night. He went round the room, seeing that the outer door was securely locked and the small high windows shuttered tight. All was very quiet; there was the steady fall of the rain without and within now and again the crack of a furnace that cooled, nothing more. He paused when he had been round the room; he was at the far end now, the single light he carried casting more shadows than lights. He set it on a bench and moved quietly to the farthest corner. There he stopped and looked up at the shelf where stood three small phials, each bearing the name *Ultio*. He did not take them down nor touch them; only looked at them with eyes that for a moment glowed—as sometimes glow the pale wood ashes when a breath passes athwart them. So he stood for a half minute; then he took up his candle and went away, securely fastening the door after him.

Keren, in the meanwhile, had long since retired to her chamber. This was a great one running over the most of the house, a garret close under the unceiled roof. Which situation pleased her, she loving the smell of the thatch, the little windows looking three ways, and the corners under the eaves and the steep gable where roof-beams crossed almost like the branches of trees. Tonight a troop of shadows held it, dark in the corners not exploded by her rushlight, darker still in the high roof. She had placed the light so that it shone mostly on the mirror which hung on the wall; a small mirror but of great beauty, clear and sharp as the black ice frozen in the blast of the east wind; a toy her father had brought from Bo-

hemia. She stood before it to-night, looking in the depths from whence her own face looked back set in a background of shadows. It is an ill thing for maids to do, to stand thus at night-time contemplating their own image in the glass. If it is not for vanity and naughty pride, then it is for the taking stock of their armament or some other thing to be deplored.

That night Keren lay long without sleeping; her thoughts not, as ordinarily, with the outer dark, the soft breathed night and the trees which pressed close to some at least of her window eaves. To-night her thoughts were with one or other of the old foolish romances she had read; or, rather, they flitted from one to other of the heroes of them. From Sir Launcelot to Sir Tristram, from him to Armadis and others, even to heroes whose sole life is in the plays written by the idle for the lewd—though of these last she had acquaintance with but a few. She knew now, she thought, how Sir Launcelot looked; he was a tall man with shoulders of fine span and eyes that lighted when he smiled. He had a deep voice, as befitted one of command and strong desires, a stalwart man; it softened gently when he spoke to women, and ever he spoke to them with deference and courtly grace; and ever he stood between them, those that needed it, and hurt or pain. He would stand so between Lady Belton and the sneers of her husband and the suffering she might feel. Observe Sir Launcelot, now in splashed riding dress, come to the door of the stone room of Lowbole, and afterwards sitting at table with one Ashe and his daughter. Observe him inly chafing at the behaving of Sir James to his wife, and longing to espouse her cause and right her wrong. The which the said Ashe's daughter, perceiving, approved; the perfect knight must pity the distressed and battle for them; those who are not distressed and are able to battle for themselves would not have it otherwise. Indeed, they would strike hands with the knight and win the field with him; they two together against all the world. A very pleasing picture whereon to fall asleep to a courting owl's soft call and the smell of rain on leaf buds soon to be unfurled.

CHAPTER II

OF THE GOING OF MASTERTON FROM LOWBOLE

THE next day Lady Belton found herself seriously indisposed; so seriously that, with all the will in the world to take the road and remove her husband from the temptation she feared in the proximity of Keren, she was not able to do so.

Keren, as befitted a hostess, waited upon her in the morning to inquire how she did and to hear that she had all she needed.

The lady replied that she had everything, that she thanked her and her father for their kindness and hoped not to trespass long upon their hospitality, looking at her rather wanly as she spoke.

"How does Sir James?" she inquired. "Does he—would he seem to find the delay very troublesome?"

"He is with my father," Keren answered; "I do not know what they do."

My lady lowered her eyes; she had not asked what they did, though it was what she wanted to know.

"Your father is a very learned man," she observed, fingers pulling at the coverlet the while. "Are you—are you learned too? Do you help him with his work?" (She meant "Shall you help him—and Sir James—to-day?")

"Sometimes I am his assistant," Keren answered, "in such things as can be done under direction and with little knowledge. To-day he will do nothing in which he has need of me."

"Ah?" said my lady, and again her eyes went down.

"Shall you then perhaps walk forth and take the air?"

It would seem a fine day; though, I suppose, the neighbourhood savage?"

Now, to walk forth was precisely what Keren had in her mind; but something in the lady's tone, in the wistfulness she felt but did not understand, touched a spring of pity in her. The plan she had was desirable beyond any of her former making; but then the more contrast there was between it and the wan-faced lady in the frayed blue room.

"Madam," she said, "would you that I companied with you awhile? Can I be of any ease or service? See, I will fetch a book and read, perhaps you will sleep and forget your pain."

But the lady stayed her. "No," she said; "go forth, the day is fair. By and by, when you return perhaps.—Come and see me then again."

So Keren went.

Below stairs she found Masterton, at odds for something to do. And, as she had purposed, led him to the garden which lay about the house.

In part this was greatly neglected; that which was for pleasure had long been given over and was almost gone back to the parent wild. But another part, that which was for use, was well tended, the soil worked, the narrow paths kept, and herbs, both pot and medicinal, with other and rarer plants, grown each in the way that suited best. The year was young yet, but the season early, so that already green shoots were to be seen in many places; bushes in sheltered spots were budding and tips of fruit trees shining with gum as well as with last night's rain. Down twisty paths the two went, Masterton careful, as was his wont for any lady, to remove briars from the way. Though there was little need for this one, her petticoat was homespun and her feet shod in clouted shoon; a very country girl, without even a covering on her head. Masterton, noting the last, was solicitous lest she should receive hurt from sun or wind.

But she laughed. "My hair is sufficient," said she.

"Sufficient almost for two," he answered with gallantry. "Indeed, I have never seen it equalled for abundance or for blackness, a gipsy queen might envy it."

"My mother was an Egyptian, as you say gipsy," Keren said; "perhaps I have it from her."

"An Egyptian?" Masterton gave the girl a curious glance. "She must have been very beautiful," he said readily.

The compliment pleased her, though she did not blush thereat, her face was one little given to changes even of colour. "It was in Bohemia my father wed her," she said. "There they met and wed and lived for a time, so I have been told; but later moved northwards; it was not there she died; that was in Flanders, I think."

"It befell when you were too little to know?" Masterton asked.

"I believe I was but eighteen months," she told him. "I know nothing of it but by hearsay and little of that, for my father never speaks of it, and there is almost no other that I see. Though I do not think it would be different were there many, for the one who told me says that for the time of his wedded life my father largely disappeared from ken."

"The story sounds romantical," Masterton said.

She had not before thought it—one does not so think of one's own story; but she was glad that he found it, glad that anything she had to say should please. When he asked her further of herself she told readily what little she could.

"Always I have lived in England since I can remember," she said; "not always here, though here a good while. My father was not always with me. Sometimes he went away, perhaps to confer with the learned or to pursue studies, but I do not know. Of later years he has not gone; he has been here always since our coming to this place, excepting only once, and that not very long ago. Then he went to procure some necessary ingredient for an operation of the

Art. I do not know what, but I think there must have been danger in it. Before he went he made preparations in case he should not return."

"And left you in this lonesome spot with nothing but a lout and a woman or so?"

Keren saw no reason against it: "Why not?" she said. "He must go when he needs; maybe he will have to go soon again. There is no harm in that."

"Harm enough!" Masterton said. "A young girl in this solitary spot! A hundred ills might have happened, the least that you should have been scared to death!"

"Of what?" she asked.

Which question he ascribed to ignorance rather than lack of fear, though the eyes that met his were cool and steady and very watchful.

"A thousand things might have happened," he said. "Suppose, for the least, that thieves had broken in?"

"There is nothing to tempt any to steal," she answered, "moreover"—her lips parted in a little quiet smile—"likely I should have known what to do."

"Innocence courageous!" Masterton said. "I do not know which quality to admire more! But supposing," he suggested—"supposing your father had not returned?"

"He had arranged against he should not," she answered. "But he did return, so that is no matter. He returned, and brought with him that for which he went."

"It should have been of great value to justify such going."

She did not know what it was, beyond that it was for some process, concerning which she knew little, and had, besides, the reticence practised by the adepts and early fostered by them in any who assisted, even in blowing their fires. She could tell Masterton no more about it, even had he desired to know, which he did not. She went on, instead, to speak of her own earlier days. She feared it was but a dull record, poor fare to set before an honoured guest, and at the end she confided a fancy of which she had never before spoken to any one.

"Sometimes," she said, "I recollect, as it were, another life; I do not know if it is real or but fancy, but sometimes it comes to me. There is a town, with steep, steep houses, dark-coloured and many-pointed; rooms with little windows against which the snow lies and which have a strange smell—I sometimes think it must have been real, no dream, because of the smell. I would know it again did I meet it. The people in the town are thick-shaped"—she spread her arms to indicate girth. "They gruntle in their throats as they talk and they pray much."

"No pleasant company," Masterton said lightly.

"No," she said—she did not speak lightly at all and her eyes were dark as looking at some far object dimly seen—"I do not like it; I never liked to be there—if I was there and it is not only a fancy truly. Sometimes I think it surely must be but a fancy, for in the picture of it my father is never there; it seems always to have been before I knew him, and that is a time which could not really be. In my own mind I think a journey between then, and any life where my father is, a journey in snow, thick snow; but likely that is not real, only made, as one makes things in fancy or dreams, from nothing and without knowing that one does it."

"A chilly dream!" Masterton said. "I would make a better than that had I so fair a head to make it."

She laughed a little, the words pleasing her as the voice pleased her sensitive ears. But she perceived the talk had ceased to hold her companion's attention: she was as quick as a dog to feel when she had lost the full attention of those she was with, and now, for the first time, humble as a dog in her desire to win and her readiness to forgive losing it. She rummaged her brain for other things more entertaining and spoke of this and that, of Lady Belton, of a dozen things, with the knack women have.

The garden was surrounded by a high hedge, close clipped and thick as a wall; in one place a hole was cut and a gate set in it. On the other side was a narrow ditch, a fosse nearly full now of running water, and beyond the Forest

began. The trees were all bare now but shining at the edges, where the sun caught them, with the red and bronze of swelling buds; on the ground between dead leaves the tender-bladed grass showed incredibly green, and in the depths beyond birds called, trying notes for the overture of the year's serenade. Keren unfastened the gate and crossed the stream, looking to him to follow. He did, and they went into the wood together.

At noon Sir James rode away. He had finished his conference with Ashe and was in a hurry to be gone. There was nothing to stay for, he said, and every reason why he should be off at once, seeing he was in haste to take ship for Flanders.

My lady did not say no; she never had yet to anything he did or decreed.

Masterton could remain and bring her when she was fit to travel, Sir James said and she agreed. He would take one servant with him, the rest might wait for her. So he arranged, and bade her good-bye while Masterton was still in the wood with Keren.

The lady made a reference to the girl, calling her fair—she could now that Sir James was moving himself out of temptation.

"Ashe's daughter?" he cried astonished. "Lord, what charms the women see!—She's as thin as a sword blade and, I'd say, about as comfortable to a man's embrace! I'd be sorry for the one that meddled with her—and more sorry for his taste! Make your mind easy there, me dear, Masterton won't be tangled by that if he stay here a month."

Lady Belton had no thought of Masterton and no care as to what he did. But Sir James's words pleased her all the same; she was quite sure he had no ulterior motive where the girl was concerned, but was truly going, actuated, as he said, by impatience to take up his command.

"Have you learned the secret which will help to success?" she asked. "Has the learned doctor confided that?"

"That?" he answered. "It's all moonshine."

Her face fell. "Might it not have served a little?" she ventured.

He was contemptuous. "Could the man serve any would he not have served himself long ago?" he said. "It needs more faith than I have to believe in philosophers with golden secrets and ragged breeches. I'd not spend a penny for anything Dr. Ashe can give."

Which was perhaps true; yet when he rode away he had one small packet stowed carefully which was not with him when he came.

Ashe stood to see him mounted, attending with all courtesy. Afterwards he watched him go down the drive, his impassive face and cold eyes—the pale face and cold eyes of the student, dead to things human, as impassive as of old. Only his fine hands closed softly on one another, very softly and as if they were satisfied. And this is to be noticed, on the shelf where the three bottles marked *Ultio* had stood, only two were now.

That evening when Keren, perhaps inclined thereto by her talk with Masterton, asked if he would soon have to go away again, he said, "No, not soon; likely there will be no need to go now."

With Sir James gone, the lady felt able to give way to her weakness as she had not while he was there, when she strove with all her powers—and a woman's powers in such things are astonishing—to seem fit for the road and to be in spirits for his pleasure. There was no longer any need for such pretence and effort against nature; Sir James was gone, Masterton did not manifest any chafing at delay, and her enforced host did not hasten her departure. Indeed, the learned doctor showed her more skill and knowledge of the human frame than any into whose hands she had before come; and his daughter's attention she found a quaint and pleasing thing. Keren stood beside her knight in the cause of his lady in distress. Though this also should be said, she had always something of pity for the unjustly hurt.

Thus it befell that in those early days of spring, when green first comes to the land and song to the branches, Masterton remained at Lowbole. And each day he walked with Keren in the Forest; and each day she showed him something new, for she was eager, inwardly but deeply eager, that he should be pleased and not grow weary. She showed him all the treasures of the growing woods, which were the dearest treasures that she had; she showed him the hollow where spring first came and the hawthorn leaves first uncurled; she gathered him the earliest primroses, warmed to life on a southern bank. She took him to the solemn place of beeches where, under the twilight of the trees, winter hid, and the dead leaves lay undisturbed these many years by other feet than hers; and to the hill-top whence he might see the green mist of buds which in one night spread over everything, the first veil with which the woods veil themselves for the year's bridal. She showed him where the tom-tit would later make its nest, and where the woodpeckers, like busy carpenters, had been tapping on some ancient trunk. She showed him where squirrels hid their winter hoard and once took captive a nimble brown creature for him to see. She had a knack for handling beasts, coming to them quietly and without causing alarm, and, before they knew it, putting a hand upon them; and when she had once done that they were still to the touch, though whether from fear or love or something different to either one cannot say.

And Masterton went with her; he had nothing else to do; moreover he found it pleasant enough. It is true that, just as he could not see, as she did, where a stoat has passed or hear a new note in the thristle's song or smell when rain was coming, so he could not truly see her. He did not see her other than a child, or ever think of her as one who might, in different time and circumstance, be other than the docile creature he found her, meek and humble, and ready to serve.

There were, of course, times when Keren was not free. Had old Joan had her way, she had seldom been if it was

to wander the woods with the enforced guest; but for Joan's word Keren cared nothing, and on this subject Thomas Ashe uttered none; he was preoccupied or else more than usual trusting or indifferent of his daughter. When Keren was not free it was when she was in attendance on Lady Belton or else under her father's commands for some operation. At the former Masterton did not grudge, although it left him solitary and at odds for occupation. At the other he grudged more until he was admitted to the stone room, on the proviso that he never carried from thence any tale of what was done. After that he was less impatient, because somewhat more entertained, though he never discovered any consuming interest in the operations, nor saw anything to justify the secrecy demanded by all dreamers and decoctors who follow Alchemy and the Hermetic Arts.

Once an achievement caught his attention, when in a crucible, which to his eyes had held little besides clay before firing, a wonderful blue substance was found. A stone, hard as lazuli and purely blue as the finest of that rarity, came forth when the furnace had done its work.

"Egad!" he cried when he saw it. "This is wonderful! You rival the true stone here! There are many would give a good price for this. It is a discovery of profitable account."

He spoke as if he had made a discovery. So he had, for he had not before an idea that the philosophers dealt with anything but trash.

But Ashe shrugged his shoulders. "I think not," he said.

Masterton persisted; he took up the stone, an irregular block of the size about of an hen's egg and of a most dense and deep blue. "You have outstripped nature," he said, "none of the true stone I have seen excels this; but little equals it. A lapidary would give much for the secret of the preparation, others also." And he went on to speak of what money might be made here.

Ashe heard him, but only said: "Not in my life, nor yours."

"Not when you hide the secret and your powers in this lonely spot," Masterton told him. "You should out into the world, sir; you have secrets of worth; you have rivalled nature here, who knows but what you may touch her in the making of other rarities, perhaps the diamond itself or even the looked-for secret of gold. You should to Court."

"Which Court?" Ashe asked—"that where presided Sir Matthew Hale?" (That good man, who passed sentence on the Suffolk witches, was little more than ten years dead; there were plenty living who not only had known him, but who were ready, like him, to attest to their belief in the horrible sin of witchcraft, even to the enforcing of the last penalty upon the accused.)

Masterton knew this, but laughed at the notion that any such danger lay there. "Who could smell witchcraft in this?" he cried. "No one, not the veriest babe. Sir, I assure you, though we of the world may be a sorry lot for learning compared to such as yours, we are not all blind, we reverence wisdom when we meet it. You will always find those who are proud to proclaim a nation's ornament in its learned men."

Ashe only said, "A small part of the world blind has been known to be enough. Even my ancestor, Dee, did not entirely escape the penalty exacted by such partial blindness, although his skill discovered much that was of service to the realm and although he lived under a Queen more eager to gain by his powers than fearful to suffer from them. Since his time the Art has fallen to darker days and been driven to darker places and come, justly or unjustly, I do not say which, to greater disrepute."

But Masterton was not convinced, he still thought, and said, that Ashe was greatly mistaken to withhold his work and the achievements of his learning from the world. "I am almost of a mind to proclaim you," he said jestingly, "and against your will give you renown."

"You will not that," the other said. "I have your word that what you see here is forgotten when you go."

He spoke as one who is sure that the promise will be kept—perhaps because he had the means to enforce it, though if this were so Masterton did not note it; he had given his word, that was enough guarantee. He admitted it now, and Ashe went on to speak of his small claim to renown and less desire for it.

"There is," he said, "nothing here and nothing I do that is of value to the world, nothing that it would value—and what is here dies when I die. I covet only to live a quiet life and die a quiet death, unknown and meddling with none; these I think I will achieve; and perhaps one other thing before I go."

"Your father is a philosopher," Masterton said afterwards to Keren. "Above the common passions and ambitions of man and impervious to them; such an one as many have boasted to be, but none, that I know of, have truly been."

"Yes," Keren said, but she did not know.

She knew almost nothing of the passions and ambitions of men, and less of the world where they played their parts.

Of the last she sometimes sought information during those days; trying to learn the ways and doings of towns, of ladies of fashion and others. Not often asking questions and so betraying the ignorance of which she was ashamed, rather leading Masterton, or more often Lady Belton, to speak, and, without their knowing, drawing what information she could therefrom; and when she was alone striving to weave the knowledge to some useful form. Sometimes of a night she went over what she had learnt in the day, piecing the scraps together and struggling to have a complete view of the world unknown. Once or twice she decided what she herself would do in this or that circumstance were she of fashion; just as once or twice she practised arranging her hair as she judged a lady of the mode wore hers. On these nights when she fell asleep she did not notice the smell of the trees or the calling of the owl to its mate. These things, which heretofore had

been so near—as close to the walls of her being as to those of the house, seemed to have receded somewhat. In dreams, though, they still came; in dreams the earthy smell of woods drowned the odour of pomander and the trees rose, serried ranks of great quietness where the diminishing figure of a knight ever receded farther and farther.

At length there came a day when Lady Belton was so recovered as to talk of going away. She had talked much and often of the kindness she had received and the hospitality she was trespassing upon and feared, though she was assured to the contrary, that she was wearying. She spoke of all again now, but also spoke of an end to the trespass and of going away. They begged her not to unduly hasten, Thomas Ashe as physician, Keren as lady of the house—and one of the two at least used no mere form of words when protesting the wish that she should remain longer. None the less she decided to go; there was no excuse to stay and, as she said with tears in her eyes, she already owed a debt of kindness she could never repay. She would go, she said, on the next fine day.

The servants packed, very glad to do it; they had not enjoyed the enforced sojourn, their quarters here had been too straight and the table too plain. The fine day came; the coach was got out from the ruinous stables; the horses prepared, the baggage brought down. My lady's woman, with more sprightliness than she had shown for some while, dressed my lady in travelling cloak and hat and brought her to the door.

Thomas Ashe was in the hallway to speed the parting guests. Old Joan stood there with some last cordial or comfort to support upon the journey. Keren stood by the door; she stood in a ray of sunlight, very golden; Lady Belton looked at her rather wistfully.

"Good-bye," she said, and she gave her hand—she had given her cheek but something held her back. "You have been good to me, child," she said half shyly. "God bless you, child and—and send you happy fate."

Keren lifted eyes that were full of light, almost arrogant in joy—God had sent her a happy fate. Its embodiment stood behind the lady, tightening a sword belt. But the spirit of it, something other than that, lay within her own soul and gilded the gold of day and lighted the dark of night, a something, it seemed, which could not be taken away. Did he go, he would come back again; should she wait, in the end she must win; she was sure of it, as sure as that he now stood here.

She took the lady's hand and carried it to her lips; a pity for one who had missed this radiance and who suffered and was weak, possessing her.

"Thank you, my lady," she said softly; "thank you many times."

Then she bade good-bye, and Lady Belton got into the coach and, with words of farewell and backward looks, was driven away.

Masterton prepared to mount. He had stood by while the lady was placed, very attentive for her comfort, the stowing of her cushions and the unfolding of her wrap. Now he turned to take his own leave with words of thanks, an apt expression, half admiration, half envy, of the philosophic peace he was leaving undisturbed, and a lingering look—that look with the smile in the eyes and the softening voice, for Keren.

"You will come back," she said, though not as one who entreats or commands, rather says what is so sure as to hardly need saying.

"Yes," he said, "if I may—some day."

He took her hand; perhaps he meant to kiss it courtly, though he had not done such a thing before; indeed, he had seldom touched it in all the time they had spent together, and had not offered her any of the gallantries not unusually offered to young women. Even now when he took her hand at parting, before he could raise it the fingers had closed on his with a firm touch and the complimentary kiss was unbestowed.

"You will come," she said again with a little quiet smile and let him go.

He mounted, the last of the servants was mounted before, and with another good-bye started in the wake of the coach, already out of sight down the grass-grown drive. Half-way a turn hid him; but at the end, near the gateway, it was possible to see and be seen once more; there he turned and, almost drawing rein, waved his hat in farewell. Then he put spurs to his horse and cantered away. And, doubtless, soon caught up with the coach; and, doubtless, rode beside it the long spring day.

CHAPTER III

OF THE COMING OF ZACHARY WARD TO LOWBOLE

THAT spring Zachary Ward came to Lowbole. On a day in early April he sat under a beech beside the road which goes through the Great Wood, and there mended a rent in a coat, not of the youngest. As he sewed he sang:—

“Tom sat under the green tree bough,
And a merry Tom was he!
(*With a phw-it, phw-it, phew-eel*)
The devil he came—I dont know how—
And offered him pleasant things three,
Pleasant things, pleasant things three, my boys.
Golden gear and plenty of beer and laughing-eyed womankin toys.

“And Tom from under the green tree bough,
He laughed at the pleasant things three.
(*With a phw-it, phw-it, phew-eel*)
Said he to the devil: ‘What want I now
With these in the woodland free?
The woodland, the woodland free, Master Evil,
Where the tree is a king and the season is spring and there isn’t
no work for the devil!’”

Here he pricked his finger and broke off to swear profanely; but in a little resumed the song—

“Tom sat under a green tree bough,
And a saint came there to see—”

There he stopped, for Tobiah the Dissenter came round the bend of the road. And if that good man were not a saint, he had at least the look and bearing of one of the godly, and one who followed a godly calling and that in no low tone or with light under bushel.

When he saw Zachary he saluted him as he did any

stranger. Afterwards he said: "You were, I think, singing a song of the saints, sir?" and he fixed Zachary with an inquiring eye, with perhaps as much of the eagle as the dove in it. The Lord is but ill served by doves in evil times, and the good man, Tobiah, was aware of it; also that he had a charge to correct any when met in need of it by the roadside, in high places or in low. He was not one to evade his calling, nor yet to be evaded. He was fain now to hear the song and, if need be, correct that.

"A trifle," Zachary said, waving it aside modestly, "a trifle of my own composition, nothing."

"I would hear it," said Tobiah.

"It is unworthy," the other protested; "I would not trespass upon your time."

"I have leisure," said Tobiah, and sat down on the further end of the felled trunk whereon Zachary sat.

And Zachary, who had had some experience of men, recognised the nature of the sitting. "Since you honour me," he said, and forthwith completed the song; possibly not quite as in his first composition:—

"Tom sat under the green tree bough,
And a saint came there to see—
(*With a phw-it, phw-it, phew-ee!*)
A saint that preached to the sinner how
There were promised him terrors three—
Terrors and terrors three—just see,
Dust for desire, and burning hell fire and judgment eternald.

"Tom sat under a green tree bough,
A woeful Tom was he!
(*With a phw-it, phw-it, phew-ee!*)
He wept and he howled and repented him; Ow!
Of his sins some hundred and three—
Hundreds and hundreds and three.
'I'll reform,' he was sworn, 'I'll try and reform, the Lord lending help to me!'"

"A not ungodly song," Tobiah said, "though a somewhat ungodly tune; I like not altogether the whistling accompaniment."

"It is catching to the ear," Zachary submitted; it was, it had a sweetness and a shrillness wholly infectious. "In these days one must bait even the traps of virtue with the red herrings of this world."

"That may be," Tobiah allowed, "I admit it; but I fear there is often more tending to consider the bait than the trap in such sinner catching. However, I do not quarrel with you on that count now, for I am well pleased to meet one even so far versed in the ways of righteousness as you would seem."

Zachary accepted the approval modestly. "I have had the fortune to meet with some who are eminent professors," he said, "both in the universities and seats of learning, to which I went in my youth, and by the roadside and in the obscure corners, with which in these later years I have been made familiar—I will not say by misfortune, seeing in what measure I have profited."

Tobiah nodded. "In these days," he said, "a man may profit in obscure places, yea, more than in the high ones, for the godly are driven—or sought to be driven—into '*caves and dens of the earth*' to practise their godliness."

And he went on to speak of the efforts which, it was reported, were being made in some parts to put into execution the acts (of the late King) which decreed that whosoever preached in Conventicles should not come within five miles of a corporate town. And that other, of equal malevolence against the free Word, which threatened with fine or imprisonment whoever held or attended a public service other than that by law established. The both which acts, at times actively enforced and at times less rigorously, were just now, it was said, in active operation in some places, though fortunately as yet there was peace for believers hereabouts. "Not," said Tobiah, "that any such laws are a stay to preaching. The man of God is not muzzled by any parish beadle or constable of the ward; no, nor act of Parliament neither. When the Lord bids him speak, he speaks, in season and out, to all and sundry."

"Supposing such valour brings to gaol?" Zachary suggested.

"If the Lord sends a man to gaol," Tobiah replied, "to gaol he goes; doubtless to preach to the spirits in prison, first speaking to the magistrates of damnation and wrath to come."

"I perceive, sir," Zachary said respectfully, "that you are a man of valour in the field, and something of a philosopher besides."

"No philosopher," Tobiah corrected, "I hold not with heathendom, to which the philosophers belonged."

But at that Zachary protested: "Would you condemn them all?" he inquired. "Consider, they lived according to the light that was then in the world; many, the greater part, were of the Church established in their day."

"That is as it may be," Tobiah replied, "I had not myself heard it and see small good in it. For my part I do not hold with a Church established; the Church is a step-daughter of the Scarlet Woman and Beelzebub."

"Of both the two? How can that be? Who then is the natural parent?"

Tobiah stroked his long chin. "I take back Beelzebub," he said after consideration. "She of Rome is the step-dam of the Church. The relationship is plain both in the conformity there is between them and the inconformity—a step-mother ever hates her step-child, and not least when there is some similarity or at least rivalry between them."

"My experience runs the same," Zachary said, putting on his coat. He had finished his mending now and prepared to go.

But Tobiah's way lay with his for a little and the worthy man was not for parting yet; he had conceived some liking for the discourse of the other, also he was desirous to hear to what experience he had referred. He had a godly curiosity in affairs of his fellow-men, how else, and if he did not know of them, could he resolve them when called upon to do so?

Accordingly they set out together down the Forest road,

no such ill going now, for there had been a week of dryness and the sun at present shone very pleasantly through the trees, newly broken into leaf.

"I would," said Tobiah as they started, "hear of what kind your experience is; whether of the untender mercies of a spiritual step-parent or of the lesser evil of a fleshly one?"

"Of the flesh, of the flesh," Zachary answered; "in matters of the spirit I am but a tyro."

"Time mends that in those that are set to seek the Lord," Tobiah said. "This step-parent according to the flesh—was it female?"

"It was."

Tobiah nodded. "I thought so; this folly of remarriage is more often committed by men than women. I have little opinion of marriage and none of second marriage; he that, once bit, is not twice shy deserves what befalls him, and that is usually ill enough. Your father, no doubt, has repented long ere this?"

"Not to my knowledge," Zachary answered. "Though, truth to tell, I have not seen him these several years."

"Ah?" said Tobiah inquiringly. "The step-dame worked it that you were shown the door? It is often the way"; and he quoted from the *Wisdom of the Son of Sirach*: "*There be three things that mine heart feareth; and for the fourth I was sore afraid: the slander of a city, the gathering together of an unruly multitude, and a false accusation: all these are worse than death. But a grief of heart and sorrow is a woman that is jealous over another woman;*" and one that is jealous for her own over another's son is hardly less deadly of hate. Your step-dame, I take it, had gotten a son of her own by your father?"

"And a daughter," Zachary said. "God's blessing on them!"

"Sir?" said Tobiah surprised. "Your words betoken a Christian spirit, something more Christian than one looks to see in one driven from his father's home."

Zachary shrugged, "In my father's house," said he,

"I should have ate solid and slept heavy; I should have gone to market, to meet and to meals; regularly to bottle and to bed; I should have lived as a stalled ox with sufficiency of provender; but I should not have had the privilege of thus falling in with you."

Tobiah stroked his chin, eyeing him with some doubt.

But Zachary went on convincingly. "This Jacob and Jacobia," he said, "supplanter and supplantress, are the gift of God. Would you have me quarrel with that? Why, they and their mother's jealousy for them sent me to the schools—Prague, Geneva, Reutzberg, far places for the son of a country squire, but the further the better, for the more out of the way and the slower and more seldom the return. And they and their mother's jealousy for them, opened the door when student days were done and when an eldest son at home, or abroad at charge upon his father, was something of an item to the income. Reverend sir, I ask you, is there anything more fair than the open door and liberty to live and to see? I have found nothing, and I have tried it this good while."

"H'm," said Tobiah, though not entirely convinced. "It is well to be of a contented mind, contentment is a comforting sauce, though I do not myself hold it the worse for being accompanied by a moderately furnished trencher. I do not bepraise a man who, embracing hunger unnecessarily, expects the Lord to provide. The Lord has something else to do. Also such a one is cousin german to him that turns his back on his own for the sake of a squeam—which is the sin of pride and foolishness; notably when to do so is to give occasion for injustice and the contentious and covetous woman to triumph. I trust, sir, you are purposed eventually to go back to your father and your own?"

Zachary's eyes—they were very bright light eyes, sometimes blue and sometimes green—narrowed, growing darkly blue. "Yes, one day I will go back," he said.

Then he stopped. "Till then," he said, and his eyes had become twinkling green again—"till then, how can I repine for my lot, seeing that this mode of life brings me such

acquaintance by the way?" and he took leave of Tobiah, saying he had to follow a bye-path that here left the main track.

Now on that day Keren was walking in the Great Wood. At this time she was very glad, more glad even than of old, to escape to the Forest. There was there an added sweetness for her now, and a solace for one who heretofore had not stood in need of solace—she could walk its paths in thought with Masterton. The imagination of youth is sometimes such that it can recall man or place so that they seem veritably present, and revive at will trivial scenes or great ones as if the very actors were there. Keren could and did most plainly do this; calling up images as well as ever fabled mirror and seeing them touched with that light which never is on things of earth. Thus, though Masterton was gone these two weeks, he still was with her in the Forest, yet not he, nor even that which she saw him when there in the flesh, but a finer image and nobler thing than that. In this guise he walked with her and talked—as he had not talked in flesh, and she answered, as she had not answered when the real man was at her side—all something transfigured as in a magic glass. The whole carried on in silence and with no outside object to be seen except a girl who passed absorbed along the Forest paths.

She was so going and so occupied when she unexpectedly met Zachary in a thick part of the wood.

"What!" he said. "The foster-daughter of the Forest gods, Mistress Keren-happuch in a maze!"

Her baptized name was Keren-happuch, though none called her by it; nor, one suspects, did her gipsy mother select it. Zachary was the only one who used it. He was also the one of whom she had spoken to Masterton, as telling her what she knew of her mother and her father's wedding. His acquaintance with Ashe did not date quite from those days, but it was sufficiently intimate, and if he did not know of the Master's affairs from himself (and he certainly did not, for Ashe never spoke of them) he knew them from some one else. Keren did not ask from whom

or how; she took Zachary and his knowledge and his comings to Lowbole as she took the coming of the rain or sunshine or any specific season.

They fell into step now, pursuing the way together; that is, when the path was wide enough, when it was not they walked one behind the other. As they went she told any small happenings that had been since he last was there, six months gone, and so in time spoke of the visitors at Lowbole; though, perhaps, not so soon as one would have thought, seeing how large they bulked in her mind. From which reticence Zachary may have deduced something. She spoke of Sir James and of Masterton, but little more of the second than the first, and of my lady; more of my lady than the other two, praising her gentleness and her kindness, admiring the elegance of her manner and her dress. Afterwards she spoke of Sir James's behaviour to her, this with a sparkle of anger. "And she loves him!" she concluded, as one who announces what is almost incredible. "It is plain to see, she loves him in spite of it!"

"What of that?"

"What of it? It is amazing! Did one so treat me, I would hate him; I would never forgive him!"

Zachary cocked an eyebrow at her; he had that way sometimes of lifting one as a terrier cocks an ear. "Ah?" said he, then he looked up into the trees above. "She thinks," he soliloquized to a tit he saw there—"she thinks she loves him, and thinks she'd never forgive him! Well well, well! Still, there's the inclusion of the qualifying 'think,' two qualifying 'thinks,' that gives one to hope. She may have bought a primer, though she's not begun to learn."

"I said no such thing!" Keren cried with anger. "I said I would not forgive—nor would I, not that I loved."

"That is true," Zachary admitted, "you said nothing of love, it was I that spoke of it. Go to, I will make you a song of love."

He leaned back against a trunk and took a pipe from his pocket.

The piercing sweetness, the poignancy of the notes of a

pipe! There is nothing that thrills with that exquisite pain, not even the note of a blackbird singing in wet twilight alone, nor the white shining in the catkined woods of early spring!

He blew a few notes and then sang—

"I sing of Love, the masterling,
Who kissed curst Kate and showed her fair,
And turned to gold Meg's sandy hair;
Whose magic made the common rare,
And poor be rich, and timid dare—
In the turning year comes Spring!

"I sing of Love, the whole world's king!
The cock bird's gay in the heart of the wood,
The lad's coat vies with the lass's hood,
The wisest man's in a foolish mood,
The earth's for wooer or for wooed—
In the turning year's come Spring!

"I sing of Love, a passing thing.
There are some who wooed and rode away,
And some who wed and wept next day;
Kate's face is curst, Meg's hair turned grey,
And come regrets and work for play,
The year has turned, 'tis gone, the Spring.

"I sing of Love, eternal thing!
Under the ice the streams still run;
Though pale in the sky still shines the sun;
When life's ended new life's begun;
There's hope where there's faith for every one.
At the winter's end, there's another Spring."

The song ceased with soft pipe notes, and Keren moved uneasily.

"I do not like it," she said. "Moreover, I think it is foolish, much of what you sang."

"On all counts true," Zachary said. "It is foolish in the eyes of the wise, moonshine; also you have no reason to like it. Exit, then, love. We speak now of something else." He pocketed the pipe, and they resumed the way, talking of other things; among them some particulars of the

Forest wanderings with Masterton. It was after that, a while after, that Zachary harked back to the subject of love.

"There was one Will Shakspeare," he said, "of less repute now than formerly, who set forth in a comedy of faerie how the fairy queen fell in love with an ass; and, striving to pleasure the creature and win him, had her elves 'feed him with the honey bags stolen from the honey bees' and 'pluck the wings from painted butterflies to fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.' Which seemed to me a very tragical comedy, though one which I have seen pitifully enacted on other than the Thespian stage, and likely to be re-enacted again; indeed, whenever like seeks other than like in love. For I would have you know—I have this of a godly man, not the one with whom I consorted to-day but another—he spoke it of the spirit, I of the flesh, and both truly. It is this.—There are bodies celestial and bodies terrestrial; bodies natural and unnatural; of affinity with the earth and affinity with bricks and mortar and candle-light and perfumery and the foibles that melt before a new rising mode. And the one cannot blend nor enter into the desires and deserts and life of the other, any more than can the *alum* and *aqua purissima* of your father's preparings."

"He does not seek that they should," Keren retorted. She did not chose to seek for any explanation of what was said; she spoke, instead of her father, how he fared and what did, until they parted not far from the Grange.

"Tell the learned doctor," Zachary said, "that, with permission, I will wait on him to-morrow; then I will also perhaps have the pleasure to bring a book for your acceptance."

It was Zachary that Keren owed such tales of romance, plays and other stuff on paper as she possessed or, indeed, knew of. She was pleased to hear that one more might be added to her store and entreated the name. But he would not tell, saying that he had not yet made the purchase but had only seen it in the wallet of a fellow-traveller,

a rag-man from Petticoat Fair. With that he bade her good-bye.

The news that Zachary Ward proposed coming was pleasing to Ashe. Of fellow-men Zachary was possibly the only one whom he felt any pleasure to see. He was, for one thing, a singular good craftsman, almost an expert in the blowing and annealing of glass as the Bohemians, from whom he had learnt it. Since alchemists and masters of the Hermetic Arts must mend and alter, and even largely make, their own vessels one can see of what value this was. Further, he was no mean smith, understanding the fusion and using of metals in an uncommon degree. And, to conclude, he was read in the works of the alchemists and demonologists of older and the philosophers and mathematicians of more recent times. He was little of a practitioner certainly and no man's disciple, but a handy assistant when pleased to assist, and one of whose occasional coming Ashe, more solitary even than most of the students of the Art, was glad. At such times there was a recasting and repairing of old implements and a cunning making of new. Pelicans and alembics and flasks took shape under Zachary's hand, furnaces were repaired and iron vessels soldered. There were other doings too, preparations made and apparatus got ready for difficult and secret processes, operations asking the attention of more than one adept at once. At these times the furnaces often glowed all through the night, and the dawn found the two, Zachary and Ashe, at work and unaware that the night was gone.

"As if," old Joan complained, "the Lord had set no difference between night and day and a Christian bed was the last place to spend the night in! And for dinner"—the worthy soul's patience failed her here, albeit she was afraid to speak her mind to the offenders. "One would think," she said, "a good dish of roast was of no more account than skillet!" The which was a grievous folly to her, for she herself liked things in order, venerating the roast beef of Sunday almost as much as the other ordinances of that day, and feeling that to lose a night from bed

were much as to lose one's character. She had tried to inculcate some of the same sound doctrine into Keren; and was in the main satisfied that she had—probably without the best grounds for the thought. When Zachary Ward came to Lowbole and such order as heretofore prevailed disappeared, she repined for Keren as well as for herself.

Not that she need, Keren, it must be said, took kindly to the disorder. On the third day after Zachary's coming he and she took their supper in the doorway which led from the back parts of the house to the orchard behind. Ashe was making calculations in the stone room and had more desire for their absence than their presence. Joan ate solidly and solemnly in her small parlour; a good table before her knees and a good cushion to her back were more commendable to her—orderliness apart—than a twilight snowed with plum blossom and a slab of cold stone. With Keren it was otherwise; it was she who had proposed the supper here, forgetting in the call of dews and dusks the elegance of the world that she sometimes strove to learn.

Yet the thought of that world was not gone; she often cogitated upon it. The book which Zachary had brought her helped to keep it in her mind. This book, purchased, as he said, from the rag-man and by him doubtless from some lady's lady, was no romance, as others he had brought, but *Letters Writ for the Instruction of Gentlewomen upon Their Entering into the Polite World: with Sundry Warnings and Hints upon the Nice Conduct of Several Occasions*. A small, thumbled volume, the worse for the company it had kept, but containing much information. Keren read it as, likely, it is not often the fortune of such instructions to be read, with close attention, an ordered memory and a reasoning mind which began by accepting statements as premises or mathematical truths, and went on to deduce conclusions or inquire reasons from them with a logical precision. A treatment not well suited to all the affairs of the *Polite World*, and which produced but unsatisfactory results here. Nevertheless, and in spite of puzzle and some dissatisfaction with what she read, she did not go to Zachary for infor-

mation, even though he was the only person from whom she could hope for light; she was wary of asking him anything direct. However, she sometimes asked him indirect, or sought for information, putting questions which, in a way, arose from her reading. Her book dwelt constantly on breeding and beauty: "Ladies of breeding do this," "No lady with pretensions to beauty may do the other." In the *Polite World*, it seemed, all ladies had birth and beauty, things with which she fancied she herself might be but ill equipped. Having some anxiety to know how she stood, she guardedly sought information from Zachary.

That evening, as they took their supper together at the back door, she put a question, beginning a little from her object.

"Was my mother a beauty?" she inquired.

"I don't know that I can fairly speak of her looks," he answered. "I saw her but once, and that under circumstances"—he paused to choose a word—"not calculated to set off delicate charms. Moreover, I was a lad when she died, not of the age of a connoisseur."

"Did others hold her beautiful?"

"I have heard it said; and heard it denied."

"Did my father think her beautiful?"

Zachary smiled a little, though not at the persistence of her questioning, for he knew that of old. "Of what colour is the sun at mid-day?" he asked her.

"The sun?"

"Yes; what does one see when one looks to the sun at mid-day? What colour?"

"No colour. You see the sun; there is nothing else."

"So I have heard your father saw your mother and she him. They saw each other; there was nothing else."

"Oh?" Keren said, and fell silent as before a great mystery. One before which her own questions, and the original aim of them, sank away. "Did they love so?" she asked rather shyly at last.

Zachary shrugged his shoulders. "If they loved, then others do not. Certainly this would seem a different thing

from the thousand varieties which pass by that name with the rest of us."

He stretched for the pitcher of milk. "Here is wisdom for you," he said. "In this world the most of us get our deserts, grumble-stomachs notwithstanding. Do we behave ourselves tolerable, then our fortunes are tolerable, in love and elsewhere—or even something over the tolerable. Fate's no stinger, do you take her smiling. But the transfiguration of life is no man's deserts; it's the gift of the gods, given only to few, and to be received with trembling, whether it is the transfiguration of joy or of pain. And the one of these, I fancy, is very apt to join hands with the other."

Keren said "Oh!" again, and again sat silent, perhaps turning the wisdom in her mind, perhaps wondering if this transfiguration would come to her. In a while she held her hand for the pitcher; and when he had poured for her, spoke of other things, asking questions concerning her mother, who she was and, in more particular than she had learned before, what she was.

But she learnt almost nothing she did not already know. The dead woman had been a gipsy, that Zachary vouched for; met, it was reported, by Ashe in Bohemia, or some part almost so far south.

"Married by him according to the rites of the tribe," Zachary said, "so I understood; though also at some time according to the law of the land and the rites of the Church. I suppose because the cautious, law-abiding, hearth-keeping blood of his respectable ancestry ran in him. Though certainly the wooing according to old Dordendoft, could not have been of that sort. He saw her and she rose up; she looked upon him and he took her hand; and they went away together as those touched by God. But certainly she was his legal wife; that came out—"

"When?" Keren asked.

"When she died," he answered.

"Who was Dordendoft?" she asked a while later.

"A man of much learning and yet more kindness. He was my preceptor in the days we speak of, when your mother died, and for a good while after. It is to him principally that I owe what I tell of her—also much besides. Your father likewise, I think, loved him and certainly stands in his debt; you, too, perhaps in a sort. For the rest, there is no more to tell; he has been dead these ten years."

Just then came Joan's voice calling. Keren rose. Some household duty claimed her and, though she had small inclination for it, she went. It was ever her way to conform so far as possible to small demands, early perceiving that that way lay liberty in great matters, and freedom from surveillance and inquisition into what she might otherwise do. Zachary sat on alone, fingering the pipe he had taken from his pocket. Once or twice he drew soft notes from it, plaintive and piercing sweet. They reached Keren within the house and fretted her. Later she heard them form themselves into some part of the air he had sung a few days gone, the song of Love the Masterling and the spring that goes. She took her work to another room and shut the door.

CHAPTER IV

OF THE ATTEMPTING OF THE *SPIRITUS VINI* *ÆTHEREUS* AT LOWBOLE

ON the third Tuesday in April Thomas Ashe began the operation upon which he had long been set, which was nothing less than to make the *Spiritus Vini Æthereus*. He had more times than once attempted this; in many ways, too, but always heretofore without coming to the goal; often, indeed, ending in darkness (or in flame), though sometimes gaining knowledge on other substances. He had begun the search for this ethereal spirit so long ago as the days of Keren's birth, when he worked with Gustav Schleger—that Schleger who has since made a name in alchemy and Hermetic medicine for an elixir *Ælum Vitrioli Dulce Verum*, which some say is of great potency, and some say of no value at all; and some few suspicion he owed it to the work of another from whom he stole it at a time when that other could press no claim. If this last were so, then that other might perhaps have been Ashe. Certainly the ethereal spirit which he sought had some relationship, at all events in its beginnings, to Schleger's *Ælum*, or to beginnings of that from which the *Ælum* was derived. And certainly the time of the theft, if theft it was, might well have tallied with the time of the partnership and common work of the two.

But if this were so, none knew of it; Ashe never spoke of it; and for the wrong, if wrong there had been, took no vengeance and exacted no penalty, living ever a quiet and retired man. All the earlier years of Keren's life he had lain quiet, almost as one who has reason not to court observation or one whose life is cut in half and who has but a half or torpid life left. And for all the years, earlier

and later, he had worked patiently at the processes of the Art; pleased with the cold flicker of pleasure, which is like the faint glow that passes over ashes nearly cold, when he had some fixed oil or elixir not achieved before. Beyond that taking count of nothing; a man to whom nothing without mattered, neither wars nor rumours of wars, nor fall of dynasty nor rise of religion; not even, it would seem, personal affront or past loss; all alike fused in the melting pot of the Art. Yet this is certain; there are two things men do well to fear—a long memory and the power to wait; and a third which may be added to them, those that have a measure of their own and do not prize what others prize, nor reckon of worth what is ordinarily reckoned, nor hold of any weight the condemnation or approval of God, man or devil.

On this third Tuesday in April preparations were made in the stone room at Lowbole, and all was got ready for the trial of this last, best and most hoped of method for obtaining the ethereal spirit. Under the direction of Ashe vessels of the very finest had been got ready by Zachary Ward, some made, some altered, some fitted and luted together; the glass retort, the iron pot, the furnace, even the heap of fine sifted sand, all were prepared. The materials for the operation were ready too, composed by Ashe in past toilsome days; each the purest that his skill could obtain, each selected, after repeated trial, as the best of its kind. The spirit of wine, prepared after the prescription of the great Paracelsus: *"Digest in horse dung wine that has been poured into a pelican continuing for a period of two months until you see a thin pure spirit like a sort of fat, which is the spirit of the wine, spontaneously evolved."* One knows how the words run in the Master's *Book Concerning Long Life*. And the oil of vitriol, the blessed oil the older adepts called it because of its many virtues, extracted by a distillation in an alembic well luted and placed over a mild fire; and afterward, when all the tedious process of congestion had been performed, finished in a furnace

kept burning forty days. All were ready now and on that day, with Zachary to help and Keren to tend the fire, the final operation was begun.

Does any wish to read of it? He can in the papers of that Society called Royal because chartered by the late King. There is an account of the operation as it was re-discovered and worked out by another when Ashe was gone to give account of acts done in the body. The doings in the stone room at Lowbole were the same, or nearly, as those later described in the papers aforementioned. There was the careful blending of the two seemingly unblendables—the ponderous mineral spirit and the inflammable vinous spirit; the cautious heating of the furnace till the sand in the iron pot felt the same to the hand as did the belly of the retort, heated by the commotion of the uniting spirits within. There was the placing of the retort upon the fire, and the fitting of it to the capacious receiver set in cold water and wrapped about with woollen cloth kept constantly wet. This last was Keren's work, while Zachary applied himself to raising the fire, and Ashe watched. Principally he watched the receiver and the slow drops that fell into it as the fire below the retort increased. He told them, ordering the slacking or increasing of the heat as their number grew or diminished; counting between their fall (five between each it should be) as one counts the beats of a sick man's pulse; the upper hemisphere of the receiver, the while, being filled with a fine white mist and the air of the stone room sweet as with the scent of true marjoram.

But half-way through the account written by the later master one reads the warning: "If you do not use the greatest precaution the liquor in the retort will run over; the fire must cease as soon as the ethereal spirits are gone over; for there remains behind an *alum vini*, which will arise, run over and often cause explosions." One does not know how much by experience he knew this; nor how many times, nor with what expenditure of danger and loss he suffered it himself before he found the true moment to

stay and the true heat to achieve. But certainly this one knows—it must have been by experience and by loss he learnt, for in that way only and to such only as will, thus daring, approach, do the Divine secrets of Nature reveal themselves. In the stone room at Lowbole on this third Tuesday in April, which was the first time in the history of man that this ether was begun to be prepared—in that place and on that day the lesson was so taught. While the white mist still filled the upper half of the receiver and the sweet scent still hung in the air, the drops suddenly ceased. In one moment the scent had changed to the foul and suffocating smell of brimstone and the pit; the liquor in the retort uprose with terrible commotion, leapt over into the fire and, with loud report, all was sheathed in flame.

Ashe, bending over the furnace, was caught in it; for an instant he showed a man of flame. Then Zachary flung his arms about him, striving to crush out the flames, and dragged him backwards towards the outer door. Keren, behind the furnace with the water pots and wet clothes, started back at the report, but swiftly after leant forward and flung the wet mass and the great vessels of water on the fire; then, turning, threw the spare pot of sand which stood there upon them. Then she, too, struggled towards the door. Through an air very dense she staggered, the fume of the choking fire, and the foul odours of brimstone blent with the subtle sweet breath of the ethereal spirit, which goes to man's senses with a stupefaction a thousand times greater than that of wine—whereof it is the soul and quintessential spirit.

"It's fast," Zachary gasped; he was still struggling with the writhing Ashe and with naked hands crushing his garments or tearing them from him.

"Bolted," Keren muttered and stooped to the bolt. Her head throbbed as she did so; it throbbed as it would burst, for the suffocating fumes lay heaviest upon the floor. The bolt resisted for a moment, to her burnt fingers the touch of it was as it were red hot; then it moved; she pulled it back, opened the door and staggered out.

Keren sat on the young grass and leaned with her head in a bush. For a little she wondered at the bush and its greenness—leaves look very green and large, each large enough for a map of the world, when you are right under and among them. The birds sang, in the branches above they sang very loud; it seemed surprising they should sing after what had happened, the fire and fume should have frightened them; through the open door of the stone room the smoke still rolled out.

"One should have shut the door," Keren said, and her voice came quiet and as if from a long way off. "The draught may make the fire burn more."

"Yes," Zachary said.

He was on the grass too, but a little behind her; she did not see him and in a sense hardly thought of him as there.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not much, I think." Then, the dense vapours clearing more from her mind, she remembered better. "You?" she said. "Are you hurt—and father?"

Zachary did not answer; he kept himself between her and the injured man; which was the easier in that Ashe was quiet now, whether in a stupor of pain or from the suffocating vapours or from death itself he could not tell. "I'll get him indoors," he said; "his hurts must be dressed. Can you fetch help?"

She nodded and got to her feet. At first she was not quite sure of them; her head felt light, but her mind very clear and extraordinarily calm. She went towards the house, going carefully but gaining control as she went. As she passed the door of the stone room she shut it; afterwards she went round to the back to fetch help.

Late that day Ashe lay in an upper room. He was swathed in bandages and redolent of healing oils, his eyes looking out between folds of linen. They were unhurt, though the brows were burnt away; it was clear now that his sight was safe. It was also clear that he would not.

die (unless mortification set in), and might in time recover the use of his hands, although they were much hurt. For the rest, he suffered greatly and it is likely his mind took the stroke no more happily than his body. To be inactive, to be stopped on the threshold of accomplishment, not to know when—or even whether—it will be possible to begin again, is no easy thing. He said nothing of it, made no outcry; the which, it is possible, did not make it easier for him, though perhaps for those about him.

He turned his eyes on Zachary at length. "Have you been within?" he asked; it was the first he had said, and it was husky and hardly to be heard.

"Yes," Zachary answered, "I have fastened the outer door inside and the other one this side. Here is the key."

Ashe signed to put it under the pillow.

"The fire was out," Zachary said as he obeyed, "else I had not shut it up. It was quite out, though the fumes still hung about; the damage is not the greatest."

"What is destroyed?"

"Some of the new vessels," Zachary answered, "some of them and some old ones; some vials were shaken down by the explosion and some near the furnace, where the flames mounted, are charred or burst; but many are untouched and some of those that fell lie unbroken."

For a little Ashe lay seeing in mind the havoc made, the broken glass and scattered substances; curious instruments shattered and precious elixirs, the fruit of many days, months even, of patient labour, poured out irrecoverably.

"The *Spiritus vini æthereus*?" he queried at length, his eyes asking rather than his lips.

"There is none," Zachary answered, "all was destroyed—the retort burst, the fragments scattered among the sand."

Ashe nodded, or made as if he would. All was to do again from the beginning, even the preparation of the necessary parts; all was to do again. Such catastrophies befall the adepts, and when befallen, are beyond the common run of men to measure; there are no words for them. The adepts use none, only begin over again, as if time were

eternal and man immortal—which is folly. Yet, certainly, life is but as a little happening in a great circle, Nature is immeasurable and knowledge eternal even though man goes to his long home and is no more seen.

Ashe roused himself. "You are not to go," he whispered, "you are not to go into the stone room, nor touch anything there till I can be carried down; neither you nor Keren."

Zachary had no thought of doing so; the workshop of the adept was no place for the handling of the uninitiated; he was more than sufficiently initiated to be sure of that. He promised that he would touch nothing till the master could be there to direct.

And when Ashe, remembering, asked that he would remain at Lowbole till then, he promised that he would.

So he remained and spent the days that followed in sharing Keren's task of waiting upon her father, of doing what was possible to lessen his sufferings and relieve the intolerable tedium of the time. This until the day when the injured man announced that he would wait no longer, but would be carried down to the stone room.

It was over soon for such a thing; much too soon a leech or apothecary would have said. But that was no matter to Ashe, go he would; the thought of the stone room, the disorder there, still more the draw and pull of the place itself and what it was and held, grew beyond endurance. He would be taken there and look if he could not handle.

"There is no need for a return," he said; "since it seems the passage is to be difficult I will remain. Make me a bed there."

And Keren obeyed, though old Joan held her hands in horror.

"Lie in so unwholesome a place!" she cried. "A flagged floor and stone walls! Enough to give one one's death, even were there no worse evils there than mortal chill!"

"There are no worse evils for him," Zachary assured her,

"and that we may think a lessening one, seeing the days and nights begin to warm. A strange taste, to be there, I grant you, but—a man and his work. That, I take it, is something as a woman and her babe, though without the beneficence of a grace of nature."

And Joan, perforce, stood aside, she could not otherwise. And Keren, to whom the order seemed more comprehensible, made the bed on a space on the floor clear of any débris of the accident.

There they brought Ashe, sweating profusely from pain, and sometimes, in spite of stoicism, calling out about it on the transit. There they brought him, and there on the bed deposited him, Zachary and Giles, the man, with Keren to ease at the corners and Joan to stand by and (inly) bemoan.

When they had him there and the servants dismissed he lay a time without speaking. His eyes moved quickly to the roof, the stone arch blackened where the fire had flamed; to the furnace, cracked and strained where the liquor had burned and boiled up; to the floor, to every heap of ash or débris or glint of broken bottle.

"The big alembic," he said at last, "it is not broken."

And later: "Four of the small ones are, and the new flask with the three necks, and the retort that was upon the bench. My most curious dragon—" he raised himself a little and looked into a corner repository. "Ah, that is intact—and the shelf where the tinctures stood? Set up the bottle at the end; it lies down."

Zachary set it up and afterwards obeyed other commands as they were given; Keren doing the same, for soon the commands were given fast enough to employ both. By degrees they began to restore order. The furnace was cleared out, the fused remains of the vessels and substances employed in the late operation taken away; broken glass and scattered soot and sediment swept up; fallen implements and vessels gathered and examined; those that might be repaired or used for some purpose set on one side; those beyond even the holding of water or carrying of fire on another for the rubbish heap. Ashe lay watching, only

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speaking to direct, saying nothing of loss nor regret, never a word one way or the other.

Towards the far end of the afternoon Keren found, in a corner where it had rolled, a phial tied down with bladder.

"Here is the *Ultio*," she said, and stooped to take it.

"Don't touch it!" Ashe cried, striving to raise himself on an elbow.

"Is it cracked? is it broken?" he asked.

"No," she answered; "it is sound, I think. The bladder is tied tight upon the stopper, and there seems no crack anywhere upon it."

Zachary had come across and stood with her scrutinising the small bottle, though without stooping to it or touching it; the two of them examining it and reporting upon it. "It would appear perfectly whole," said he.

"Fill a small basin with water," Ashe commanded.

"Take the phial in the tongs and set it within, seeing that the water comes to the top."

Zachary obeyed, and when it was done Ashe said: "Now search for another like it, on the shelf above the small furnace."

"The shelf has gone," Keren said, "the fire or the explosion must have destroyed it."

"Then look on the floor," Ashe said; "they were of the strongest making and may well endure the fall. Look for it. There should be another like the first."

"Two others," she corrected; "there were three of them. I remember I noted them when I blew the fire the night the travellers came."

"One has gone since then," Ashe said shortly; "there should be but two now. Search for the second; if it fell, as the first, on the shredded bark in the corner it will not be hurt. Find it and put it with the other in the water."

They found it safe and treated it as the other. Afterwards, by Ashe's orders, they stirred up the fire which had been lighted on one of the old open hearths.

"Now," he said, when the fire was red and the phials

had stood a while in the basin. "Now set sand in another basin of the same size and take the phials from the water and dry them by turning in the sand, being careful the while to hold them with the pincers."

He watched while this was done. Afterwards he said: "Pour the water on to the fire, pour it slowly, so that the fire is not extinguished but the water consumed and dried up."

This Zachary did, filling the room with the evil odour of watered fire and making some considerable smoke, the which Ashe did not regard at all. "Now the sand," he said—"or wait—coax the fire to a good heat again, then put on the sand, by little and little, that it, too, may be consumed; then break both basins into the flames."

"And the phials?" Zachary asked when all was done. "Where shall I set them?"

Ashe looked round, then nodded to a high ledge where one smallish bottle already stood: "Put them there," he said; "they may keep company with that, the Love Philtre as it was known in Ancient Rome, a very seemly company"—he smiled grimly, or would, had not the muscles and skin of his burnt face twisted the smile to something harsher.

The phials were placed as he ordered and no more said about them. Keren, perhaps, from service to the Art, Zachary, perhaps from nature and a living in the world, had that discretion which says little untimely.

Nevertheless when they took their supper together that evening the thought of this stuff, called *Ultio* recurred to Keren. Ashe, by that time was left to repose; alone, for he would have no attendant with him; she was free for the while, so was Zachary. She leaned back against the door jamb looking out over the orchard. The white plum blossoms were all spent now, but the pink apple still lingered here and there, the violet of the twilight splashed with them.

"It is a strange name, *Ultio*," she said, "not like others, Calcium, Mercury, the Fixed Oil of Salt Petre, and such." Zachary nodded.

"It has something of a curious likeness to the Latin," she

said thoughtfully; her father had given her some teaching in the Latin, and though she had not learnt easily, her memory was good.

"*Ulcisei*—to revenge," Zachary said; "*ulcisior*—I revenge, and the noun—"

"Does this name bear a resemblance to the noun?" she asked.

He nodded. "A notable resemblance," he said, and stretched his hand for the bread.

"Whence came this stuff?" he asked after a little. He was not given to prying in what did not concern him; certainly not to the asking of questions, whereby men commonly learn little but the ways in which embarrassment expresses itself and the duplicity of their fellow-men. This matter, however, was somewhat beyond the common; a secret of the adept, no doubt, and as such to be respected, still one of no usual order. "Do you know whence and what this stuff is?" he asked.

Keren shook her head. "It was made, I think," she said, "when my father came back from the last journey; that one which he went not such a very great while ago. He went then to get something he had need of in his work; I do not know what, but I think it must have been that whereof the *Ultio* is made, for before that I do not remember to have seen those phials, and afterwards I did; there were three of them; at first there were three in the row."

Zachary looked thoughtful; he felt that here was no light.

She went on to tell him, as she had told Masterton, how her father had prepared for that journey as if he might not return; as if, she thought, he were going into danger; but that he had returned safe and well and so nothing said. "He worked alone at the operation, for which he used that which he brought with him. He did not command me to blow the fire or do anything at that time; indeed, I did not once go into the stone room. Nor did any; nor did he come to the house; only took the air at the outer door sometimes, and saw no one, not even Giles, who used

to take the food to the door and set it there; the food and the rats."

"Rats?"

She nodded. "There were several," she said; "they were caught in the barn, taken alive, and brought to the stone room in a cage. I do not know for what they were, I suppose some part of the operation; I did not see them again, though once afterwards in the ashes of a furnace that was burnt out, I saw the part of the skull of one."

"H'm," Zachary said and no more. He took tobacco and a pipe from his pocket, "This," he said, "is an operation beyond your knowledge and mine, and, seemingly, a most rare and singular one. Also, clearly, no concern of ours."

She agreed, the more readily perhaps that her interest had gone elsewhere.

"The love philtre," she said, "that which is on the ledge where these others now stand—my father called it the love philtre of Ancient Rome—what is it?"

"What he says, I suspect," Zachary answered.

"A medicine to produce love? How can such a thing be?"

Zachary shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it a medicine to produce love?" she persisted.

"Or lust, which some mistake for it."

She fitted her fingers together slowly, a way she had when thinking. "How can a medicine of the body produce that which is of the mind—the soul?" she said thoughtfully.

Zachary laughed a little. "The parent begins to show!" he said. "The philosophers and mathematicians and logicians have a strain here which is beside and not blent with the strain of the Forest Gods! Know, O lady that puts a knife between the skin and the rind, that a medicine of the body cannot touch the soul; but know also, that to some love is no matter of the soul, and lust is not so to any."

She looked consideringly over her interlaced fingers.

"What then does this medicine do?" she asked.

"'Tis said creates an appetite," he answered. "The

which, I take it, like all great appetites and all that are enforced, is liable to be no dainty feeder; the food at hand is choice enough for an hungry man, and a blazing eager furnace is not nice to reject the first fuel proffered it."

"That I understand," she said; "the rest, not. The medicine you hold to be of no use?"

"If you understand that," he said, "you understand well enough. It is of no good; further, it is not for the use of the good, still less for the not-good; there is the conclusion of the whole matter. Shall I make you a song of love?"

"No," she said quickly, rising as she spoke. "I do not like it, I do not like it at all;" and she went into the house.

He sat on alone awhile, smoking thoughtfully; but his thoughts were not with the love philtre of Ancient Rome which had caught Keren's attention; they had gone back to the phials named *Ultio*.

"I wonder," so his thoughts ran, "I wonder now, where that third phial is? That, I suspicion, is more to the purpose, a deal more for some one, than any other mystery here."

But he did not inquire; nor is it likely that he would have learnt if he had; of which, no doubt, he was fully aware. He said no more about it, then or later, either to Keren or Ashe. The phials remained undisturbed on the ledge; others were set in their proper places, all others, without query or comment.

Gradually order was restored to the stone room; and gradually some part of the damage done was repaired, Zachary working with blowpipe and soldering iron, while Keren, under her father's direction, finished the setting straight. Ashe, who began to mend quicker when he was in the stone room, quite quickly when he was once able to move about, beginning to do a little with his injured hands. When he could do that, and when order was fully restored and the damage, so far as might be, repaired, Zachary went away. He packed his small bundle, received from Ashe payment for the work done, and, bidding farewell, took the road again.

CHAPTER V

OF THE SECOND COMING OF MASTERDON TO LOWBOLE

IN August Masterton came again to Lowbole. It was four months since he went away—more.

For Keren the time had been occupied. A while after Zachary Ward left, Ashe had reopened his hurts, so that the dressings began anew and the helplessness too. And since he was impatient to return to the attempt of the ethereal spirit, he could not wait for his hands to completely heal, but began, even while maimed, the preliminary operations, the tedious preparing of the spirit of wine and the Blessed Oil. And when his hurts prevented him from the work, Keren must work under him, fulfilling directions minutely, while he sat by directing with what patience he might and chafing at his helplessness and the delay. So Keren was occupied during the end of spring and the earlier summer; toiling with some success and some failures, accomplishing as much as he could expect if not so much, or near so fast, as he could desire. For herself, she did not mind the tasks he set her; she had a certain serviceableness to the processes of the Art (as one might expect seeing her parentage and rearing); also it gave her an occupation, the which she stood in some need of those days. When towards the zenith of the summer her father, now recovered, called less for her and she had hours alone, she found the time languish. She went, of course, much into the woods in those days; they were ever her friends and ever she found companionship there, but perhaps not quite as of old.

The season was one of drought; the grass limp in sheltered glades, burnt and gone where the sun reached it;

the leaves, some dry on the branches, some prematurely fallen, the trees all tired, and the birds hushed; only the flies hummed, almost with the sound of distant habitations of men. Still, in the woods, as ever, there was refreshment. There were pools where water still lay darkling under shadowy branches; Keren knew them as the deer did, and knew where were bogs no drought could dry, in whose sedges frogs and newts waited the coming of the delayed rain. To these spots she went; and to brakes where the tall fern still breathed coolness. And, as in spring, she rewalked the ways in mind with Masterton. In mind she still companied with him as before. Or rather, somewhat as before, though not quite; she had grown older in these months, and the strain of the logicians in her was not always asleep at the dictates of the other, although it had not as yet told her that this was of the stuff that dreams are made of. The dream itself had grown, too, and the hero of it; the thought-created man imperceptibly become more different from the actual, and more real. A real creature now, having parts and attributes of his own as any living, yet not, perhaps, quite like to any man that lived.

At times she rebelled at the long waiting for him; or wondered why he did not come or when he would. But most usually she was patient with a calm patience, feeling sure beyond assurance that he would come. And in August he did come.

Riding to the door one afternoon just when the day was beginning to decline. Up the avenue with the shadows of the trees, still in the windless air, falling athwart him, and the sun, where it looked through, striking on his face. So he came. And at his coming everything since his going was as if it had not been; as if there had been no months between. There had been none, the time when he was not there did not now count; it was not time, not days of dawn and noontime and sunset, only a blank, a little strip of waste, wiped out and forgotten.

Keren came out to greet him, her heart beating no faster; there was nothing here to make it beat; she was not flut-

tered, or surprised, only through all her being ran a thrill as when a string is touched by some caressing hand. This was but what she had looked for; a fact that was as inevitable as the sunrising, and so needed no explaining. As such she took his coming.

And as such, as a fact that it never entered his mind to need to account for, he took his not coming earlier. He had come, he told Ashe, and Keren smiled a little at the needless particularity to her father—he had come at the request of Lady Belton to bring a packet for Mistress Ashe. He had, he said, to ride Londonwards, and the lady, hearing it, had asked him to go this much out of the way to leave the packet for her. This was his excuse, he said, and he hoped they would forgive his intrusion for Lady Belton's sake. If they would he need not, he was sure, tell them how glad he was of the opportunity thus presented of visiting once more this retreat in the forest.

The last was said with a glance towards Keren, one of those gentle glances with which he spoke to women and which suggested much. It put a new complexion on his words and would have compensated, had compensation been needed, for that it was at my lady's behest, not his own sole choice, that he had come now. Happy in this and all else, Keren opened her packet. Within she found a laced kerchief and a note from Lady Belton saying she hoped she would wear it in memory of the giver, who had grateful memories of a sojourn at Lowbole and much kindness shown.

Keren was greatly pleased; she had little or no finery and the present itself delighted her; and the thought of the sender, of whom, as one knows, she had very gentle memories, pleased her even more. Her eyes softened and her cheeks flushed as she shook out the dainty thing and thought of Lady Belton and how she had thus remembered her. For a little, in her tender pleasure in the gift and in the contentment and soft meekness which had spread over her when Masterton rode up the avenue, she was a different being. No foster daughter of the Forest Gods, no keen-

sensed, listening child of gipsy mother, or watchful, fearless assistant of philosopher father, but a young maid merely. A maiden on the brink of womanhood, half-wistful; a thing in part pathetic, ready, for that moment at least, for one to gather her and bid her call him master.

Keren put the laced kerchief on that evening before supper and with care arranged her hair. She had not so much time to give to her toilet as she might have wished; but had she taken more she must have earlier left the guest, and of the two things to leave him was the one she preferred least. So she made a hasty toilet, planning the while where they would go to-morrow, he and she together; what do, and what of all that was to be said, first say.

As yet nothing of much account had been said; what talk there had been opportunity for, was general; as much or more addressed to her father as to her. At supper it was the same; but it did not matter, she was satisfied to have him here, to hear the remembered softening in his voice when he turned to her, and see that lighting in his eyes with which, perhaps without knowing it, he complimented women. And if at the meal he said nothing but what any man might have said, and all considerably below what the dream man called Masterton had often said when she walked the woods in fancy with him—that did not matter. The critic in her was asleep, logic had gone to sleep; they had been but small things when he was here before and had never had a say in the acquaintance with him, nor ever lived in his company.

Once during supper a passing thought clouded; it was when he asked her after the nest they had inspected at its beginnings; he called it a robin's, and had forgotten the builders were not the red-breasted birds. It was strange to her that he should have forgotten; but it was not that which jarred, it was something, almost imperceptible, which made her for a moment feel as with one who kindly asks a child of its toys. She remembered suddenly what Zachary had said of the tragic comedy of the love of the Queen of Faeries. The feeling passed quickly, she putting it from

her. But in another form it recurred, with a momentary glance, hardly doubt, at his all-wisdom; this, when he asked in somewhat the same manner of her father's work. He made courteous inquiry as to how went the operations of the Art and what notable discoveries the learned doctor had made; in the way, Keren guessed, that he might have made inquiry of old Joan of the keeping of the year's conserves and how they had borne the summer's heat.

Ashe replied civilly—and trivially—telling nothing really, as was his way; and Keren began quickly to speak of Lady Belton, how she did and where she was and where Sir James was now.

Masterton told her that Sir James had some new post assigned him, in England this time. "A post," he said ironically, "which is military and is not, and carries nothing to do. My lady is with him, and will be all winter there is no doubt."

Afterwards he spoke a little of Lady Belton; though not a great deal nor very readily, with a quietness of tone and a shadowing of eyes which looked away. Keren guessed that life was not being kind to the poor lady, and thought that the perfect knight was, like herself, moved with pity. Other explanation, for her, there was none, nor did she want one.

After supper they sat in a parlour with open windows; the night was very still and warm, though overcloudy to see the moonrise. The three of them sat together, the talk going here and there pleasantly; Keren, perhaps, saying the least, but content it should be so. Once, when the hoot of an owl broke the stillness, she turned to Masterton and said—

"'Tis the old white one from the barn. Do you call to mind how you wanted to see him take flight?"

"I remember," Masterton said; "we were never in time, if I recollect aright."

They had been once, but Keren did not tell him so; nor did she say "Shall we try to-night?" She waited for him to say it; and when, being comfortable with tobacco and a

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noteworthy cobwebbed bottle, and, moreover, weary with a long day's ride, he did not say it, she said no more. After all, there was to-morrow, a long to-morrow, and probably a certain number of to-morrows after that. With this thought she retired when the time came, still content.

Masterton sat on with his host after she had gone, speaking now of Sir James and how he had prospered in the undertaking upon which he had set forth when he left Lowbole.

"One cannot say that he has won renown," he said. "Reutzberg was reduced, it is true, but no credit to him. No credit to any one. There would not, that I see, have even been any for you, learned sir, had he, as my lady wished, advised with you before starting; things were beyond your touching."

"Very likely," Ashe said. "After all, what could I have done?"

"Without doubt a great deal." Masterton answered readily, though perhaps without meaning it, for a little later he said: "For myself, I am, I fear, something sceptical; but her ladyship believed and no doubt, if you say it, you could have lent advice which might have proved serviceable. Had I been in my cousin's place I would certainly have availed myself of your help; but he was always one to believe in himself and go his own way unaided and unadvised. He went so this time, and came back, as I say, not defeated certainly, but with his reputation not advanced one whit, and to advance it was what he chiefly hoped to do; it stands in some need of repair. Reutzberg, I must tell you, was reduced by plague, not by prowess; and the infection of the disease spread to the camp and destroyed a part of my cousin's men."

"Ah?" Ashe said softly, "that was misfortune, indeed, for besiegers and besieged."

"James was bitter about it," Masterton told him; "he said it was his usual cursed luck; he had believed he was to win honour that time; he vowed he would have done so had not the burghers cheated him by breeding infection from their filthy ways. He was, as I say, very bitter; and

I, by way of sympathy, reminded him that had he done as his lady wished, he would have come to a certain learned man for help and perhaps avoided all this."

"I fear that reminder would not soothe him."

Masterton laughed. "It did not," he admitted. "It incensed him so that he abused me, and you too. To be honest, I fear he called you fool and charlatan; the which, as I pointed out, reflected on his own sense more than yours, since he had refused to put you to the test."

Ashe nodded; he showed no resentment at this natural weakness of a man incensed.

Masterton went on to speak of Reutzberg, of the coming of plague and the number destroyed, details which he had from his cousin.

"It would seem to have been a pretty sharp visitation," he said, "and somewhat sudden in its on-coming, so far as those without the town had news; breaking out here and there, a half dozen spots at once, but raging most in the houses about the Square."

"About the Square?" Ashe asked. "That is an open space, I take it? And the houses there of the larger sort? One does not look for infection to be strongest where it is spacious and where dwell the wealthier people."

"No," Masterton admitted. "Likely it was not so really, likely it is only talk made when all was over because some weighty man living there lost his only son and his burgomaster brother, in the opposite house, the young girl he'd lately married. My cousin only heard the talk after the event. You may be sure he gave the place a wide berth. Such happenings bulk big in after talk, decimate the population when it comes to the telling."

Ashe agreed this was often so, and Masterton, after mentioning some more rumours, said: "The learned, I hear, were wise. There would seem to have been a select coterie there—the schools, indeed, are something famous in a small way—but the good dominies had all withdrawn to some safer place before the leaguer began; so the flower of learning has not been cropped by plague or by soldiery

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or anything else. A matter for which one should give thanks; one can find a weighty man's son at any corner and burgomasters' wives are as plentiful as blackberries on the Continent of Europe, but a learned man is a rare plant."

"Yes," said Ashe, and no more, and Masterton noted that he looked weary.

Feeling some compunction for having kept him thus late, he rose to bid good-night.

Ashe accompanied him to the door. As they reached it Masterton thought he heard a step without.

"It will not be anything," Ashe said, "only some animal from the Forest come for water; the pools are dry or low now, and sometimes beasts come at night for the water my man leaves in pails."

However, to satisfy the other, he opened the door and they went out. They found, as he expected, no one and nothing; the creature, if one there had been, having taken fright at sound of their approach. The moon was clear of clouds now, the night very warm and still; the whole so beautiful that one was tempted to linger without rather than go back into the heat of closed doors. They lingered, passing around the house and coming to halt on the far side, from whence one had near sight of the Forest.

Keren, meanwhile, had been in her chamber this while. She had undressed, but was not inclined for sleep; she knelt by one of the small windows in the thatch, looking out to the trees. There was in her soul, as it were a subdued radiance half humble, half glad, a little shot with pain; heaven seemed near that night; and doubt, the little gnawing doubt which had just quivered once and twice, had gone to sleep again.

After a time—she did not know how long, for her mind floated out into a shimmering, where there was no time and things had no form and the smell of the dew and the sleeping Forest was not separate from Masterton and the happiness in her own soul. After a time, voices came up to her; one was that of Masterton, and at the sound of it

her attention fastened, as crystals fasten as they form on a thread dropped into a liquor.

The first words she heard had to do with the love philtre in the stone room. She had forgotten about it, the small bottle on the high ledge holding that which her father had called the Love Philtre as it was known in Ancient Rome; she had forgotten it these months past, but remembered when it was spoken of now. She had no idea what had gone before in the talk below, but certainly the philtre was spoken of now, Masterton saying that such things were all moonshine and old wives' tales.

Yet for all the naturalness of the opinion to one such as he, she somehow knew he did not mean his words just as he said them; some subtle instinct told her he meant something more or less than he said. Under the slighting words was a half question, and one that did not seek to hear confirmation of the contempt expressed.

Ashe's answer came up plainly. "I do not deal in moonshine; nor, I think, did they of Ancient Rome."

"But what can it do?" the other asked still, as if sceptical. "What can this, or any potion, pretend to do in so illusive a matter as love?"

"They touch the body only," Ashe answered.

"Oh, the body!" Masterton said half contemptuously.

He seemed as if he would move away, but did not go. "I suppose," he said, speaking now rather as one who lightly jests—"I suppose it is promised that this magic draught shall affect the drinker with emotion for the giver? Not, as that of fable, for the first of the opposite sex the eyes after drinking fall on?"

"Nay," Ashe answered, "I have said it is of the body. The body does not discriminate; it is the mind that does so. There is little discrimination in that which this arouses; he who would profit by what is provoked must be at hand to minister to it when the draught takes effect."

Masterton laughed, the laugh of a man of the world, a little uneasy or touched on some sensitive spot and hiding it. "A sorry draught!" he said. "Poor magic, scarcely

more serviceable to lovers than moonlight and soft airs."

(But instinct, which does not err, knew that he might yet turn about and say that, for sport, or for folly, or for any of a dozen things, he would purchase this draught.)

For the moment he continued to depreciate. "Fie, sir," he said still lightly, "what is body without soul?"

"That which it is alone possible for you to have of Lady Belton," Ashe answered. "Her heart and her soul are still her husband's. For the rest—"

"Lady Belton!" Masterton exclaimed; then he laughed again, the same laugh.

"Well?" said he, half defiant; then, with a return to the jesting—"D'ye call it discrimination, a thing of the mind, for a wife to love Sir James?"

Ashe did not answer, he had moved from the shadow to return to the house.

Masterton accompanied him. "He is as brutal to her as any butcher of Smithfield," he said as they went towards the door, and his voice had lost its lightness. "About as faithful as the village bull, and she"—he laughed bitterly—"she's an angel!"

Ashe nodded indifferently. They had reached the door now; he stood aside for Masterton to enter, and when he had done so went in himself and shut it after him.

But by the window in the thatch one knelt, white in the moonlight, all white, nightrail and ash white face; only the eyes showed dark, dark hollows from where a soul looked into a fallen world.

The clock by the stairs struck four, four sonorous strokes. The household slept. All the house was quiet, no creak of timbers, no scutter of mice; all wrapt in sleep. Only in the stone room things gently simmered and purred. A furnace, cooling, cracked; a substance, left for night and nature to mature, softly bubbled as the potency within worked unaided by the action of man; a liqueur boiled gently in a retort upon a banked fire, talking low to itself; the place was stealthily alive with a quiet, alien life of its own. The

moon was nearly down now, only a little light came in through one of the high windows; in the gloom the red eye of the fire glowed, a constant glow.

The door opened and Keren came in. She was covered in a dark cloak, hardly to be distinguished from the shadows, and she slipped among them almost as one of them. In the half dark she passed among the things which littered the floor as one familiar, and crossed the room to the far side where was deepest gloom. There, feeling for a stool, she set it by a pillared arch and mounted on it. With sure hand she felt for bottles standing on a ledge of the masonry. One, two, three, two of a size, one different. Her fingers closed on the last, and she turned to the last of the moonlight, holding the bottle up to be sure of it. As she turned the failing light struck on her face as well as on the bottle. A pale face set in black hair; one many years older than that which had looked out at woods a-dream in the moonlight; lips grim with pain, and eyes as lights flickering to darkness.

She got down from the stool, she had what she wanted, and crossed the outer door. Stooping, she drew back the bolts and opened it. There was a rose-tree growing by the wall; a few scant flowers still bloomed on it, struggling with the drought. In the dark she could not see it, but she smelt the flowers. Afterwards she hated the smell of roses. Her arm brushed them as she leaned forward opening the bottle.

Something fell on the hard earth; the thirsty roots of the tree were bedewed with moisture, the first for long; the Love Philtre as it was known in Ancient Rome sank into the cracked ground.

She drew in again and closed the door after her. She bolted it carefully, shaking back her long hair, which felt clammy now from the cool breath of the night. There is one chill hour in even the warmest night; a breath like a cool hand had passed over, entering even into the dark room with its quiet busy presences. She carried the empty bottle to a water pot and filled it there, the water feeling warm to

hands grown very cold now. Then she reached to a near shelf and took down a harmless colour liquor. Stooping to the furnace door so that she might see by the glow of the fire, she poured some into the bottle, staining the water near to the colour of the lost philtre. After that she put it back on the high ledge; put back the stool and the bottle of colour-liquor, all, so that not even Ashe could have told that anything had been moved. Then she went out and fastened the door.

Went down the long passage, quite dark now. By the small door to the dining parlour, nearly dark there, though some faint light still touched the carving upon the chimney piece and the wan faces on the mouldering tapestry, faces of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere, wrought in looms long silent. Out into the hall place, past the clock and up the awkward stairs—old strong stairs which did not creak to her feet, albeit she was so tired she did not know how she went or if with care. Suddenly it had come upon her, she was tired, as she had never been in her life before; so tired that it seemed there was no power left to think, none to feel, little to go. She crept across the dark upper hall, going slowly and yet more slow; crept up the attic stair, an interminable stair; and so to the room under the thatch.

And if any say that Keren, daughter of gipsy mother and father, terrible and implacable as the sequel will show, would have been content with no harmless colour-liquor, would rather have put poison for the love philtre, I can only say she did not, though there may have been one dark hour when the thought knocked at the door of her mind. But if it knocked, it is her affair; and if she slew it, hers; we have no right there. But this at least it is well to remember, there is something of justice and something of pity in the bigger natures even when little taught in the ways of righteousness. The hurt which that night had fallen upon Keren, lightening her eyes to that which she had not before seen, was not delivered by my lady. She, poor soul, had not sought, and did not want the love which had shattered the

maiden dream; she, rather, was, or might be, also the sufferer from it. Justice, even that untaught justice which demands vengeance for a hurt unwittingly given, did not cry out upon her; rather the pity some strong have for the weak asked that she should be protected. At all events, there it was, no poison in the stone room was touched that night; there was harmless liquor, little more than pump water, in the bottle on the high ledge.

And harmless liquor, little more than pump water, in the phial which Masterton, sceptical of its value, contemptuous of himself for carrying it, yet still doing so, took with him next morning when he rode away down the shade-splashed avenue out into the sun-glare.

CHAPTER VI

OF THE RETURN OF TOBIAH TO HIS FLOCK AND OF THE COMING OF MISTRESS SHIPP TO LOWBOLE

LET us now concern ourselves with Tobiah the Dissenter. That worthy man, as has been said, was in the Forest district in the spring of the year. He was, at the time, on a journey from London back to his usual residence and place of ministration, to wit, Colchester. As was his custom, unless otherwise called by the Lord, he did not so press forward his journey as to neglect any opportunities by the way. Rather, when it was suitable and he found any in need either of exhortation, correction or advice, he would remain a day or some days in a spot—hamlet, village or solitary farm—before making another march. Thus it was that he had not reached Colchester when Zachary Ward, but lately from Lowbole, was also on the road that lies between Chelmsford and that town.

Now that road is one made originally by those masters of the road-making craft, the Romans; it is therefore of commendable straightness, and two going by it are likely to fall in the one with the other, if the one behind is travelling faster than the one before. Thus it befell on a showery morning—there were showers in May that year but none after for the rest of the summer—on that showery morning Tobiah came up with Zachary sheltering under a tree. And though the worthy man himself did not stand for rain, or indeed, any elemental or other disturbance, he joined him, for he had conceived some liking for his conversation on their former meeting. Also he wished to know in what sort, profitable or otherwise, he had spent the time since then.

Accordingly he gave him greeting, asked of his welfare, how he did and where was bound.

To which the other replied readily enough, he was well, he went to Colchester and trusted that the Dissenter was with him both in good health and the direction of his journey.

Thus conversing they stood while the shower lasted, afterwards took the road together. When they were upon the road Tobiah began to ask where the other had been this while past and how spent the time.

"For the most part," Zachary answered, "I lay at the house of one Thomas Ashe, of Lowbole."

"Ashe?" said Tobiah, "I heard somewhat of him while in the Forest district. He is there accounted a dealer in secret arts and with evil spirits, a philosopher if not a magician."

"Ah!" Zachary said, "that is a weighty charge."

"The weight of straw!" Tobiah returned; "the stubble of fools' wits! I hold not with this smelling of the Devil in everything; it is a silly puffing up of men to accredit all their misdoings and misknowings to the direct interposition of the Devil. But this Thomas Ashe, I would hear of him. I am, I think, acquainted with a cousin of his; that is if, as I now think, he is the man of whom she spoke—Thomas Ashe, a learned doctor, she calls him, living in the Forest district, somewhat lonely."

There could be little doubt but what this was the man. Zachary said so, and asked some particulars of the cousin, of whom he had not heard before.

"Her name," Tobiah replied, "Mistress Betsy Shipp; her avocation, wife to Simon Shipp the Vintner. If you are acquainted with the town of Colchester, you are acquainted with the name of Shipp, for it is known there and respected; the well-to-do are ever respected in our town, more than the godly who are poor. Not but what Simon Shipp is well enough, honest and godfearing, albeit so snug in this world's goods; he has some of the root of the matter in him, though a man of sourish and puling sort."

"And Madam, his wife?"

"Nay," Tobiah said, "there is no puling with her; her

wine does not turn to vinegar nor the cream to curd in her churn. Her tongue, I will say, is hung over-loose in her head, but she is sound and ever keeps the besom of common sense behind her door and does not forget to use it."

"Scarcely the relative one would have looked for Dr. Ashe," Zachary commented.

But Tobiah saw no reason against it. "There are limbs and limbs to most trees," he said sententiously; "I myself had a relative that was a mighty hunter; I mean after the carnal sort of Nimrod, expert in the art of venery. Why not a person of sense in a family that has produced a spirit-monger? This Ashe, now—I call to mind to have heard that he has a daughter?"

He cocked an eye at Zachary; and when the daughter had been admitted, plainly counted in his mind the time of the sojourn at Lowbole.

"Is she fair?" he demanded.

"Nay," Zachary answered, "of the black sort rather."

Tobiah frowned. "Avoid jesting, which is unseemly," he admonished. "Black or white is all one; the devil can weave meshes of dark hair as of gold when there is to be beguiling."

Zachary smiled. "Unless I am greatly mistaken," said he, "there is little of the beguiler or the beguiled in Mistress Keren-happuch; she will not be for every man's plucking. Of what sort is she, you ask? She has the eyes of a hawk and the nerves of steel." (He was remembering the fire in the stone room and how she had behaved.) "She is not fully grown yet and, like the rushes by the river, she is growing wild; one cannot tell what she will become or if, by any chance, be noosed for a master."

"Humph!" said Tobiah, not admiringly. "Is she of the age for marriage and mischief?"

"She was a child when I saw her six months gone; she may be, though I would not wager it, a woman when I next pass that way. Now she is neither."

"Humph!" said Tobiah again. And then: "It does not

sound either wise or seemly that such should be left to dwell solitary with a learned man whose head is in the clouds or a furnace, any place remote from his daughter and her training in modesty and the fear of the Lord. Young maids need care and proper handling, else they become more snare to themselves and the community than they already are."

And forthwith he began to make inquiries into the household of Thomas Ashe, of what composed, and who, if any, had the supervision of the girl and her upbringing.

Zachary answered some questions and some he did not. The most he did, partly because Tobiah's questioning was of a searching nature admitting of no evasions, partly because he saw no harm in so doing. There were no secrets in the household at Lowbole, and, so he judged, both father and daughter were able to manage their own matters and deal with any who attempted to meddle with them, even if the unlikely happened and the Dissenter, finding himself again in the neighbourhood, thought fit to look into them.

At midday the wayfarers halted, and partook of bread and bacon at a wayside inn; a poor place but uncleanly kept, upon which Tobiah rebuked the chattering idle housewife with the words of Solomon, "*A foolish woman is clamorous,*" and those others, "*A virtuous woman looketh well to the ways of her household and eateth not the bread of idleness.*" Afterwards they took the road again, discoursing now on prayer, the efficacy thereof; upon which subject the Dissenter had much to say, concluding with the words of Scripture, "*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*"

"I know one," Zachary said, "who prayed for fair weather with a watery sunrise and wind from the southwest, and got it too. I know not if there was anything amiss with the reading of the weather signs; certainly there was not with his faith. I take it, the many of us would get more miracles did we expect more."

"Assuredly," said Tobiah, "is it not written, '*There is no restraint with the Lord*'?"

Zachary did not know that Scripture. "Though cer-

tainly," he said, "it were something of an insult to the Almighty to expect of Him only the humanly possible."

Tobiah nodded. "'*With the Lord,*" said he, "*all things are possible,*" and prayer is His sword in the hands of man. With '*the sword of the Lord and of Gideon,*' which last I take to be a strong arm and a zeal with discretion, which let no man despise—with these two the Amalekites have been overthrown."

"Midianites," Zachary corrected; "'twas with Midian, I think, sir, that Gideon warred."

"It was," Tobiah admitted; "I spoke rather in spiritual simile than historic fact. None the less it pleases me to find you so far apt to correct; it is not every man that is even thus much read in the Scripture in these days."

Thus conversing of historic fact and spiritual simile and other edifying matters, they journeyed together until they began to approach the outskirts of the town. There Zachary said they must part, as he was not purposed to pass through the town itself.

"It is a pity," Tobiah said. "I would fain have more of your acquaintance; your conversation pleases me, albeit I perceive that you have not in all matters come to grace yet."

And he requested him, should he find himself in Colchester, to visit his house.

"It is not hard to come to," he said; "it is built upon the remains of the Romans' Wall, with steps going sideways to the street. Any will direct you to it"; and he gave the name of the street.

But Zachary did not give him the name of any place of residence where he might be found. Nor yet did he give him his own name, further than the first one of Zachary; which, indeed, was all he commonly used among wayfarers and companions of the road, enough for all ordinary purposes, even, he seemed to think, for the worthy Tobiah.

So they parted, Tobiah going on into the town, Zachary leaving the road at King Cole's Kitchen and bearing away

south-eastwards by Grymes Dyke and sundry by-lanes towards the marshy country which lies about the river mouth. Not that he came right to it, but in a while struck a fair road and followed it southwards a little. Though why he did it and how profited in coming thither, it is hard to see, for at the end of his walking he only leaned over a gate, in some need of painting, and looked up a drive, in much need of weeding, to a hall, hidden, all but the chimneys, among trees. After doing that a while he exchanged words with a wayfarer, who told him there was never paint for the gates of Wythes Hall these times, nor never folk living there to speak on, Squire being away in London and Madam his wife with him. At which Zachary nodded, as one not much informed or interested; and the wayfarer passing on, he took the road again. Soon, however, he left it and struck across country to the marshland which was the confines of Wythes Hall property and over which the owners had rights of fowling and fishing. There, if he did no poaching, and May is a month when no true man touches fur or feather, he at least moved with the step and looked with the eye a poacher might envy. This till the slow-coming twilight had turned to darkness.

To return to Tobiah the Dissenter. On the Sunday that followed upon his coming to Colchester there was an assembly of the professors. At that time they met every Sunday and sometimes during the week, both for praying and preaching and expounding the Scriptures, this openly; for, although such meetings had at different times been forbidden, in Colchester at the present there was considerable liberty and a strong body of people who held, or professed to hold, away from the Church. Indeed, the weakness of many there lay rather in the running after something new than in the sliding back to the error of the old. New expounders, each with his own doctrine and each desiring to set forth the same and to stand as a minister among the people, were very ready to spring up at that season; and the foolish and the idle and sometimes the serious-minded, when wrong-headed, followed them. So that there grew

sects within sects, very disputatious; and as many congregations—consisting perhaps of a minister, two women and a man—as there were tongues after the confusion at Babel. The which some of the religious communities were resemblant to when the eye and hand of a strong leader were removed. The eye and hand of Tobiah had been removed some little time we know, and the flock had gone the way of flocks, some backsliding, some wandering, and some going after other teachers; notably a certain Samuel Calderbeck, who foretold the approaching end of all things and held himself a prophet inspired of God.

One can believe that upon his return Tobiah took up the crook with decision and did not scruple to use it where it was necessary, for reproving, rebuking and encouraging. Upon the Sunday after his home-coming he wrought with the brethren collectively on the contentious spirit there had grown up among them, and their greediness to follow after strange and new doctrines. This in the meeting room which is beside the house of Jonathan Bales, the shoemaker, where he was wont to preach. The text of his discourse was the word of the prophet Jeremiah: *"Saith the Lord, My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the Fountain of living water, and hewn them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."* Also the inquiry of the Apostle Paul: *"How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation?"* From these words he spoke to them straightly, and so as to make both the ears of some who heard him to tingle.

Among those present that Sunday—not convicted by what they heard—were Simon Shipp, the vintner, with his wife, family and household. All the household attended the meeting, the apprentices and maidservants as well as the sons and daughters. In the godly house of Shipp no superfluous work, tending only to luxury and drunkenness, was done on the Sabbath; all there must eat the roast cold on that day, so the maidservant might be fed with spiritual meats as well as the mistress. Thus the vintner went to

meeting with a flock almost like that of one of the patriarchs. The which men, however, he cannot be said otherwise to have greatly resembled, he being small and sourish looking, of a bilious habit, both of mind and body. His wife, Betsy, on the other hand, was full-sized and rosy, bringing to mind the comfort of a good open fire and an apple well matured by rain and sunshine.

To this couple Tobiah joined himself when the exhortation was over and the meeting dispersed; and with them he walked along streets decorous with Sunday quiet. For a little they spoke of the recent doings of the town and the straying of sundry. Simon Shipp had an eloquence for speaking of the shortcomings of others and a vein for the lamentable that might have served the prophet Jeremiah. But Tobiah did not hold with idle talking; no more of sins and shortcomings, when there was not edification arising therefrom, than of foolish frabbles and godless folly. So, shortly, he dismissed both the doings and misdoings of the professors from the vintner's talk, and himself spoke of other things. The matter of Thomas Ashe and his daughter Keren-happuch, as communicated by Zachary, was still in his mind; he was one who had room for matters spiritual and temporal and the affairs of many. Of this he shortly opened to Mistress Shipp.

"Concerning your cousin, Thomas Ashe—" he began.

"Thomas Ashe?" cried she. "Did you fall in with him when you were in the Forest country?" She knew the worthy man had proposed to pass through that district in his late visitation, and she did not wait for him to say yea or nay as to his having met with her cousin there. "To think," said she, "I should hear from Cousin Ashe now! 'Tis many years since I've heard sound of him! And many more since I've seen him; not since I was a little maid, and then but once! How fares it with him?"

"Well, so far as I know," Tobiah answered, "for I know not; my word is not from him but of him, mistress. He has a daughter."

"Ah, yes," Betsy nodded; "she must be a great girl now.

Let me see"—she began to sum in her head—"Peg and Richard were ten or thereabouts when I heard he was come back to England and brought a girl child with him. Millander was getting a good little maid and Sim was a fine boy. Do you mind, Simon?" She turned to her husband with a smile as if some more than commonly happy memory attached to the boyhood of this child. He smiled back, more gravely, still smiled; he was very fond of her, it was the most pleasing thing about him. "Why," the good woman ran on, "my cousin Ashe's girl must be in the seventeens or eighteens now; she would come half way between our Millander and Betty!"

"An age, mistress," said Tobiah, "needing care."

"True," Mistress Shipp agreed. "Still, I always say, keep 'em busy and keep 'em happy, and trust in the Lord; there's little mischief they're up to then, even though they are frolicsome at times."

"Your cousin's daughter," Tobiah informed her, "has no other supervision, either in things of the next world or this, than a learned parent, of somewhat magical reputation, and one, by name Joan, widow of a parish priest of the Church by law established."

"H'ff!" Mistress Shipp sniffed. "A waiting woman or decayed gentlewoman! They're all the one or the t'other, and I don't know which worst! Poor child, in the hands of such!"

She commiserated the condition of the young girl in motherly fashion; her husband also added his quota, though with some smack of the one who thanked God he (and his family) were not as other men, or even, and more especially, as this unfortunate.

At the end Mistress Shipp declared: "I've almost a mind to go and see my cousin Ashe when I journey to London to Peg this summer!"

She was promised to a visit to her eldest daughter, married this two years to a Russia merchant living in Lombard Street. She had not yet been to see her in her home. It was a great business for her to go thus far. She had hardly

been a night from her husband's house since she came to it many years ago. But there was that which drew her to London now, a baby grandson. Moreover, as she said, it was now or never with her, seeing that Millander, the next in age, was to be married at the end of the summer; with her gone, and so no other daughter than Betty to leave, the mistress could not from home.

The Forest and the residence of Thomas Ashe was by no means on the straight road to London; but when one was doing the one why not as well both, Mistress Shipp argued; to be doing both would scarcely be stranger for her than to be doing at all. If one left the London road at Stratford, it was said, or possibly at Romford, and went by by-roads, good enough in fair weather, one should come to Lowbole in a summer day's travelling.

"It is nothing of a journey," she said stoutly, when her husband, who by no means went with her to this conclusion, spoke of the difficulties of the way. He did not at all approve of such extra undertaking. He declared it unnecessary, unwise and even dangerous, and dwelt at length on the fatigues of the journey and the troublesomeness of seeking, and perhaps not finding, the house. He himself was one who seldom found what he sought, except it were trouble, which he never missed unless Betsy stood between.

This Tobiah knew, as he also knew that the good woman not only usually found what she sought, but also usually did what she purposed, with the concurrence of her husband in the long run. He himself approved the plan of the visit to Lowbole very heartily and scouted the difficulties of the way with the authority of experience as well as personal weight.

Mistress Shipp laughed cheerily at her husband's threats of bad roads and bad characters. "Who's stopping an old woman like me?" said she. "With no more pence in my pocket than'll carry me home. I shall have spent the rest in London, you may be sure; and I shall certainly send all my purchasings home by the coach, however I come myself. Mind, Simon, not so much as a finger to be laid on a single

bundle till I come, even if I'm a week and more after! I'm sure John Henry"—this was the son-in-law—"will let me have a man to go with me if I do fare to Lowbole; and I've no doubt I can hire another on the journey to show the way. And for roads—I shall be going when I'm homeward bound and that'll be half-way through September. If the roads aren't good then, why, they never can be, and all the inhabitants of that countryside must be glued fast to where they were born for want of ways to get about."

Simon looked unconvinced, but his next argument was on another tack. "I see no reason," he said, "why you should put yourself out for your cousin Ashe; he has never troubled for you. He's never so much as acknowledged we lived; he's too high for that."

The branch of the family from which Betsy sprang had descended somewhat in the world from the original status of the astrologer Dee, who had the great Cecil to his patron and Court ladies standing godmother to his children at the font. Mistress Betsy herself troubled nothing about such things, her forebears' standing or her own either; but her husband was both somewhat vain of her superior descent and somewhat resentful that there was small commerce between her and her relations; who, not being settled in that part of the country, knew almost nothing of her. The which symptoms of a worldly and a small mind in the vintner Tobiah disapproved, and the present expression of them corrected, saying—

"What is 'high,' and what is 'low' before the Lord?" and "Have a care, friend, there is that which condemns pride and yet is cousin german to it; and that which apes humility and from the dust lifts its heel as high as ever crowing cock on dunghill."

The which words made Simon bite his lip. But Mistress Shipp cried good-humouredly: "We are not high, worthy sir; nor yet, I'm sure, is my cousin Ashe. It's not that, I'll wager, that keeps him from noticing me; it's that he notices nothing outside his galley-pots. It's not haughty he is, Simon man, but learned, bless your soul!"

Her husband gave a half assent, but still persisted to ask why she should take trouble to go to Lowbole.

"To see the maid Keren-happuch, to be sure," said she. "A girl growing kissing-ripe in that lonely forest spot! A maid who's never been to a merry-making, I'll go bail, nor had so much as a decent plain body to teach her fine sewing or how to behave! No one but a parson's old widow! 'Tis a plain Christian duty to go. To bring her back here on a visit maybe!"

With the last Tobiah concurred; he thought it might be an excellent thing. The vintner, on the other hand, did not, and said again that he saw no reason why they should put themselves about for this Cousin Ashe. But the combination against him was too strong. Before they had come to the door it was as good as settled that when Mistress Shipp should go to London that summer she should, on her homeward way, go a day's journey, or two if need be, out of the road to visit Thomas Ashe.

Thus it was that on a certain day in mid-September there rode up the avenue at Lowbole a sober horseman—rather uneasy as to the seat. And behind him, on a pillion, a stout matron, very uneasy, chiefly by reason of wishing to direct the goings of the steed (as she had directed most other things throughout her life), and from her position being unable to do so. The horseman was William Senlack, factotum to the Russia merchant of Lombard Street and a very sober worthy man, who, having spent his youth about the Baltic ports, was perhaps, though long retired from the sea, more at home on any craft than a horse. The matron was Mistress Betsy Shipp, yesterday from her son-in-law's and a memorable month's visit paid to her daughter, his wife. To-day, after going considerably out of the way and having by reason of it to lie last night at a village in the Forest of Hanault; and after difficulties in finding local guides who knew the way for more than two statute miles from their own door—to-day, arrived at the Grange at Lowbole.

She had not given notice of her coming. For one rea-

son, as she said, she was not sure of getting there until she had come; for another, she was less sure still that a letter, however well directed, would reach before she did. So she took her chance and her cousin by surprise.

Not that he manifested surprise, or any excitement or disturbance at her unexpected appearance at his door. "Had an angel suddenly appeared," she afterwards said, "or an evil spirit either, it's doubtful if he'd done more than say 'you're welcome,' or 'you're not,' as the case might be. When nothing is in the common way nothing happens out of it."

Ashe made her welcome, though whether he classed her as an angel or an evil spirit he did not say. He led her in as if her coming were quite in the ordinary and bore himself a deal more calmly than Simon Shipp would have done had his sister Rachel—from four miles beyond the town—happened in in this unexpected way.

Joan came at his call. A meek widow, pinched and mild, Mistress Shipp found her. It was wonderful how the two on sight got their hackles up, before even Mistress Shipp had time to cool from her journey and while Joan was still solicitous for her comfort, and all with nothing outward that a man could see.

The two of them, in a state of wonderful politeness, with a "m'am" after every other word, were in the small parlour when Keren came in.

She stood a moment in the doorway, dazzled by coming to the shade within from the sun-blaze without. Mistress Shipp saw her more plainly than she saw. And something in the amber eyes, darker perhaps than of old, and the red lips, grown more straight, took her by surprise.

"Why, child!" she cried, "what a pretty child you are!" and she gave her a hearty kiss—almost the first that had fallen to Keren's share.

CHAPTER VII

OF THE CELEBRATING OF A WEDDING AT THE VINTNER'S IN COLCHESTER

THE vintner's daughters sat in the parlour at the back of the house; that low-ceiled parlour with the heavy presses which is so sweet in summer-time by reason of looking on to the enclosed garden where many plants of gillyflowers grow. The gillyflowers were over now, for the month of September was almost spent, but there were still other flowers. Summer lingered this year and pleasant air came in to the girls as they sat and sewed. Both sewed for the same object, both almost at the same piece, Betty making the frills, Millander stitching those already made on to the neckerchief, the last to be finished for her wedding outfit. As they sewed they talked—of the wedding, of course, it was to be very soon now, and though they had talked of it all summer there was still something fresh to be said, or some of the old to be said again—and of their cousin, Keren-happuch, whom Mistress Shipp had brought with her to pay a visit to Colchester and fill up the gap soon to be made by Millander's going.

Betty, a round-faced, rosy thing, was happy to have her come. "Of course she's not you," she said to her sister as she broke her thread, "but it's a comfort to think I'll have her—some one at nights and some one to talk with and share."

"And to do the fine sewing," Millander added. Betty was a poor hand with the needle. Of the tasks allotted between them her sister had always done the fine. Now that she was going Fortune—Fortune always favours the Bettys—had sent some one else to do them. Keren, contrary to

the foretelling of Mistress Shipp, had been well taught in the use of the needle; and since she did that as she did all else, whether watching processes of her father's art, or fashioning a dream, completely, accurately and with all attention to detail, the products of her skill were better even than Millander's and more quickly done.

"I wish she'd come now," Betty said with a yawn; "she should make this last frill. She's in the still room, I suppose?"

No doubt she was, Mistress Shipp found her handy there, though she knew less than Millander, less even than Betty. She obeyed instructions to the very last tittle of what was said and could be trusted to watch or stir a half hour as the sisters could not, never wanting to see who passed or forgetting what she did or chattering of other than the matter in hand, or, indeed, of that over much. So well had she been found worthy that she had been trusted to help in the preliminary mysteries of the making of the bride cake. Millander and Betty spoke of this now, the making of the bride cake, not Keren's share in it, and of other preparations for the wedding feast. Afterwards they talked of the expedition to be made to-morrow when they were to visit Millander's new home.

"To think that I'm going too!" Betty cried with delight. It was the sixth time that she had said it, but her delight was as fresh as ever; also her surprise that she should actually be going after all. At the first only Millander and her mother were to go to Blue-pale, the substantial farm which was to be Millander's home. They two were to go on a fixed day to see that all was in the way of being ready for the bride. Robert Stettin, the bridegroom elect, would have been pleased to see Betty, to see little orphan Kate, too, the whole family, even Susan the maid, if Millander desired. It was Simon Shipp who said Millander and her mother only should go; one does not know why, except that what savoured of merry-making found little natural favour with him; but Keren and what she said of Lady Belton's sister's wedding induced him to change his mind.

"What fortune that Lady Belton's sister had a party of friends to see her bride home!" Betty said.

"And what fortune that she told Keren so!" Millander added. Keren came in as they said this and they commented to her on the lucky chance that she happened to mention it at supper time in their father's presence.

"That was not chance," Keren said, as she took the frill Betty pressed upon her.

Millander held her needle poised! "Not chance?" queried she.

"No," Keren answered; "I said it so that your father should let us all go."

The sisters stared. "But why?" they asked. "Why? How?"

"If he thought it customary in high families for a party to go he would allow it," Keren answered, the matter so simple to her that she saw no reason for question. "I told him of this lady, afterwards he offered for us to go, that is all."

The sisters stared; this was something new to them. But at that minute Julia, the lawyer's pretty daughter, came in from next door, and the matter was put from their heads, for she had brought her new hat for them to see, the very hat she was to wear at the wedding. They must, of course, go upstairs to try it on before the mirror in their room. Afterwards they went down the garden, perhaps with the intention to let Julia out by the little back door, the nearest way home for her. But if that was the intention they did not immediately act upon it, but halted instead by the boundary wall—the one over which one could see into the potter's yard and Reuben, the artist-fingered apprentice, at work there, decorating the ware and pretending not to see the laughing faces by the wall.

Keren did not go with them; not that they would not have made her welcome, they had shown themselves ready to share any of their plays, but because she had taken the work to do, and also because she had no reason to go. She had seen the apprentice, Reuben, a while ago; the girls had

shown him the day but one after her first coming, as they had shown her their ribbons and trinkets and a dozen other things. She had no reason for looking at him again; nor yet for trying how she was become by a hat that she would never own to wear. So she finished the sewing she had begun. By that time the girls had gone to sit under the mulberry tree, the season was still warm enough for that. There she joined them; and there they all sat awhile, chattering of this and that, her and him—more especially him; and of the expedition to be made next day, wherein all regretted Julia was not to share.

"There would have been room if Kate did not go," Keren said. "Seeing how she complains of pain to-day one would have thought she were better at home."

"Poor little Kate," Betty said, "perhaps the air will do her good."

"Perhaps," Keren said, but not as one who expected it. She had taken no liking for Kate, the orphan niece of Simon Shipp, a somewhat sickly, though sharp, maid of twelve or thereabouts. And the sentiment was mutual; Kate, the petted and peevish, who could always have a pain by thinking of it, had no fancy for the newcomer with the watching eyes and the faculty for hearing more than others, even the breathing of one who listened outside the door.

On the morrow, as it happened, however, Kate had no pain; she presented herself at the time of starting as fresh as her cousins and really smarter than they. She always had the best of things when there was anything to share, from Simon because he was fond of her; from Betsy because she was not, and by deeds strove to make up for what in heart she could not give. To-day the best seat was given to her in the conveyance which had been hired from John Beddows of the *Lion* for the expedition. Not that any one minded her having that; no one minded where they sat, indeed, would happily have sat on the floor had it not been that to do so would have spoiled their style, which, seeing they must drive through the town where they were well known, would have been a pity indeed for folks who so

seldom drove. As it was they had quite an air, pretty Millander and Betty, a face to make sad eyes glad, with Keren between them; and opposite Kate, very fine if plain, and Mistress Shipp in her best bombazine and with her hat tied securely on to her head. Millander had protested a little at the tie; she thought it gave her mother something the look of a dairy woman come to market on a windy day.

But Mistress Shipp said: "No one looks at an old woman when young ones are by. Besides, look or no look and if there were lords going by—which there are not, and I'm not sorry for it, for they make a deal of trouble in their vicinity one way and another—but whoever there is or whoever there's not, I'm not for having my hat tugging at my head like a boat dragging at anchor with a falling tide."

So she gave the tie an extra pull and got to her seat, nodding to those of her neighbours who looked out to see them start. Julia came to wave farewell, and Jackman, eldest apprentice, to bring something forgotten. It was a tale of the girls that he had a fondness for Millander, but had not ventured to lift his eyes so high. On account of this she was pleased to be very kind to him that day, giving her hand lingeringly to be helped up the step, as one who, promised elsewhere, feels chaste sorrow for the less fortunate lover. A dispassionate observer might have thought he was quite as ready to linger with Betty, more ready perhaps; there is wisdom in transferring the affections to one who is free. But there was not much time for any such playing. Richard, eldest son of the house of Shipp, and, like his father, no favourer of frolic for others, came out and ordered Jackman in. Sim, the younger brother, a lad more of his mother's sort, mounted beside the coachman and all were declared ready for the start.

Away they went, through the town, clattering down the nearer streets, clattering down more distant ones, out on the south-east side, into the open country. Fields on either hand here, bigger, wider fields than any Keren had seen; the gently swelling green of cropped pasture or the silvery

yellow of stubble from whence the harvest had been cleared, all enclosed with trim hedges where only sometimes wreaths of briony and grey tufts of old-man's-beard festooned the quickset. There were cottages to be passed with gardens still gay with marigolds, and here and there a farm among yellowing trees, and once a hall, Wythes Hall, secluded behind high gates. The girls chose where they would live from among the houses they passed; they selected each a cottage or farm, two or three a-piece, or changed the decision two or three times over. Sim leaned down from the box to join in the game, but Kate would not play because when she chose the Hall—she declared in nothing else would she be free from the vulgar—Betty said she must be quick and get some paint or she would have no gates to shut the vulgar out. Whereat she said they teased her, and Betty replied she meant no harm, but, that paint was dear she knew; and Mistress Shipp silenced them.

"Chut, children!" she cried. "What a pother about paint, and other folks' paint too! To which of you does it matter whether there's paint on the gates of Wythes Hall? Not that there's like to be! There's never money for anything there, with Madam for always living in London and grudging to spend a penny here, and Mistress Clarinda grown a young lady now, and an expensive one too, I'll warrant, and the young master of an age to scatter cash about."

With that she stopped the quarrel and, their way bearing off to the right, Wythes Hall was quickly forgotten. Talking of other things and other people they passed along winding lanes through the richer inland country; and so at last to Blue-Pale, a solid plaster-built house, deep in the eaves, thick in the thatch with capacious outbuildings, and sheltering limes on the northern side.

For three hundred years the Stettins had owned and farmed the land, Robert, the present master coming to it when his father died the last winter; what time, it may be said, he set about courting Millander without delay. Which may or may not have pleased the Widow Stettin, though, so

she said, it was what she looked for and the way of the world from the time of the Patriarchs. She was still at Blue-pale—where she ruled all, men and maids, with a rod of iron—and would remain there till the bride came home. After that she was removing to Colchester, where a married daughter lived and where one of her age would be more comfortable, for the bad weather at least, than at the farm; whither she might return, on visits merely, when summer came again. All very seemly and as it should be, settled in an afternoon's discourse between Mistress Betsy Shipp and the widow. A notable meeting which took place when Mistress Stettin was in Colchester to see the daughter aforementioned and to conduct some business concerning geese; an occasion worthy of the two doughty women, principals in it, but not to be chronicled in detail for the misunderstanding of man.

The Widow Stettin came out to receive the guests now and her graciousness to Millander was as the graciousness of the dowager still regnant; but to Mistress Shipp it was the respect of an equal. They entered the house together, the stout matron and the little shrewd woman, side by side, a pleasant-spoke, housewifely pair of mild deportment, who, for native wit and for the hand to do, could have bought up any man of their belongings, and had a good balance to spare. The girls followed, Keren and Betty and Kate; Millander too, she would not wait while Robert, who had timed his work to be in and finely dressed to receive her, put Sim and the coachman on the way to the stables. No, she must come with the others; she put herself between Betty and Keren and held an arm of each when Robert, rather breathless, caught up.

"Oh!" said she in surprise. "Are you there? Where's Sim? Have you left Sim behind?"

She was wonderfully solicitous for Sim, and she talked of him quite a deal, with a sweet, cool, mind-you-keep-your-distance-please manner which tied the tongue of her lover and made him think a good deal of the size of his feet; hers were astonishingly small.

Soon, however, they sat down to dinner. What dinner! Roasted mutton stuffed with oysters brought yesterday from Pyefleet Creek; stewed carp, tender pigeons served with a sauce of gooseberries green this Whitsun and preserved in bottles till now; a hand of pork and an incomparable goose pie, besides, I think, other matters. And at the end grapes—they had ripened on the south wall of the house that sultry summer—boiled in butter and served with sippets of bread and fined sugar, very delicious. One knew there must have been a great time beforehand when the mistress regnant prepared so as to show the mistress to be (and also her mother) what could be done at Blue-pale, and, by inference, what she might be called upon to do. For this reason, and also because she was the bride-elect and the guest of the day, Millander must taste this and that, try a slice of one and a piece of another, till the case would have been hard with her had not her sense modified her politeness and at the last she declined anything more. Betty listened with awed admiration as her sister gave opinion on the dainties quite coolly, as if none of them were new to her or out of her ordinary way. Keren, however, could have told, had she been asked, which was new to Millander and which impressed her as sumptuous beyond ordinary. She also saw, as no one else did, how little the fêting and fussing of the bride-to-be was to Kate's mind. To see dainties heaped on another's plate and to have it unnoticed whether she ate or no, was new to her and displeasing. So displeasing that in a while she gave up eating, though it was a hardship to her with so many nice things to be had, and sat without speaking, looking pale and wan, till the meal was done. Until which time, it must be said, no one attended to her looks at all; then, she complaining wearily of feeling indisposed, they said she seemed tired.

Mistress Shipp cosseted her and Mistress Stettin produced a cordial, somewhat more strong than nice, and they put her to rest in the parlour; and left her there when, later, they went about the house and dairy and poultry yard to see what was to be seen. They all went; Sim first; in-

deed, he did not come to the parlour at all but spent a happy afternoon after rats with Jack, the head man at the farm. Mistress Shipp and Mistress Stettin went later; the one showing, the other admiring the stores already laid up for the winter and the preparations made against the coming in of the bride; forgetting, in the talk about linen, the question of moth in wools and the one true and perfect way of conserving plums, all about indisposed Kate. Even when, towards the end of the afternoon, they returned to the parlour they did not think of her; by then she was gone, and they were discoursing on the curing of hams and the strange ways of men with the deep attention such subjects deserve.

The girls went forth together. Keren and Betty would have been content to explore the farm, as new to the one as to the other, by themselves; or to have followed dutifully in the wake of their elders and admired the pickling tubs and looked at the hens. But Millander would not have it so: she was very wayward that afternoon, one moment telling Robert he certainly must not marry her since she could never cook as his mother did; the next, with a soft look and a clinging hand, holding him so that he could not, poor fellow, find the will to go even a few inches from her. She let him show her the house and talk of "what we will do" and "does this please you?" It was the purpose for which she had come, and she submitted with a calmness and patronage—and sometimes seeming inattention, it is to be feared—at much variance with his eager anxious way. All the same, there were times when she gave him a smile, and times when, if she did not invite, she did not resent a squeeze. These grew more as the afternoon went on and the hour of return approached. When that really came it somehow happened he and she were not to be found with the others at all.

Mistress Shipp and the widow were quite content, in spite of some parental inclination to defend each her own child. They, from their experience, knew the coy play and little queen airs some maids take on at the times when, captor

of the moment, they stand on the verge of captivity. They knew well that the fluttering bird would soon settle to the domestic hen; the male reassert himself and again take his natural dominion—to be ruled, perhaps, in the end by her who served, should she, after half a life-time's schooling, prove the better stuff of the two. They, understanding, found nothing strange in Millander and her lover.

But Keren found them very strange; to her it was a strange and a new thing, this love whereon folks wooed and wed, greatly differing from her earlier conception of it.

She sat on a bench by the dairy door towards the end of the afternoon. The lovers had disappeared now; the matrons were in the parlour; Betty, too, had vanished. There was a Cousin Jake; he had been ratting with Sim, but was not now; it had been no more than a question of opportunity how long he would and how long before he would be showing Betty the litter of puppies or the calves or some other thing. Keren was alone for the while, or thought she was, until sharply, from no great distance, she heard Kate's voice.

"I'll kill you!" it cried. "I'll kill you!" With it there came the cry of an animal, fierce with fright and pain.

There was a pump on the further side of the dairy yard with a stone trough of water before it. Keren's back was to it, but, turning, she saw it, and by it Kate, holding and smiting furiously a small cat, dripping wet and with paws tied.

She sprang to her feet and was upon the young girl in an instant. One knows the suddenness with which she went and the celerity with which she fell upon her.

"Devil!" she said with a gleam of teeth showing.

Her hand closed on Kate's as the girl lifted the bound cat to swing it against the pump; and the grip was terrible, the fingers pressing as it were between nerves and sinews.

Kate writhed in pain. "Let go," she cried. "Oh! You hurt! You're hurting me!"

But she let go herself, and, bursting into sobs of pain and rage, strove to suck the bite on the one wrist—first

cause of the trouble—and to ease the momentary anguish caused by Keren's fingers to the other.

"You have hurt me!" she sobbed. "It has hurt me!"

Keren did not answer; she held the cat, feet in one hand and head in the other, and bit through the twine which bound it.

"It has hurt me!" Kate moaned. Then, seeing what the other did, she turned upon her. "It has hurt me!" she screamed. "Do you hear?—You shan't let it go! I'll kill it!"

She sprang forward as Keren set the released cat down.

"It has bit me!" she shrieked.

"I would have bit you, toad," Keren said, catching her by the arm and holding her while the animal made off. "Had I been it and you hurt me as you hurt it, I would have bitten you; but I would have bitten to the bone, though the flesh of such an one had made me sick."

Kate twisted in the hold; from which, however, she could not get free. "I'll tell my uncle what you've done!" she cried. "I'll tell him what you said and what you did. He'll send you away! I'll ask him to punish you—to whip you!" and she broke into an hysteric of tears, sobs, and gasps which speedily were beyond any power of hers to stop.

Keren released her and stood looking at her in contempt. Then, seeing her quite bereft of any power to move or help or control herself, she led her to the pump. There she forced the bitten wrist into the trough of water and washed away the blood.

"It is nothing," she said, after looking at it.

Kate took no notice, only continuing to sob, though less noisily. Whereupon Keren sucked the wound and, after washing it again, bound it up with a strip torn from her kerchief; she had never the housekeeper's tenderness for linen gear.

Still Kate took no notice, only gasped and sobbed; by degrees, however, growing more quiet, though still inca-

pable of doing anything, and giving a little extra shriek now and then.

When the place was bound Keren put her on her knees by the trough, pumped fresh water and commanded that she should wash her face. And when she did not or could not, did it for her till the sobs had slackened to intermittent gasps only.

"For what are you crying?" she asked.

Kate did not answer. But Keren's eyes were on her and did not move.

"My wrist hurts," she whimpered.

"It doesn't," Keren said.

She took hold of the injured part with the firm light touch with which she took up wild things in the wood.

"It does not hurt," she said. "It does not hurt now."

She spoke quietly, rather as one tells another something that has to be learnt; but she looked in Kate's eyes as she spoke, as she looked in the eyes of her squirrels when she lifted them from their holes in the trees.

Kate shuddered a little and then was quiet. Afterwards she told of strange thrills, quivers of heat and deadly chill that shot through her under that look. But it may not have been true, or she may have forgotten what she really felt or if anything; it was a good while after when she gave the testimony and in circumstances favourable to the growth of such notions. At the time she said nothing about it.

Indeed, she never said a word at all about the affair, or even the wound in her wrist. Her sleeve hid the bandage, no one observed it to inquire about it and she volunteered nothing; either when she, with Keren, returned to the house to take leave of Mistress Stettin, or on the homeward drive. During the drive she was less peevish than usual; quiet at first but amiable towards the end, though careful to avoid looking at Keren; or if she did so, doing it covertly and with no good will in her eyes. But she did not mention the matter, not even to her uncle; and the wound, a small one, healed without any one being aware she had it.

The which, no doubt, was the easier since in the days that followed every one was occupied with thinking of the wedding and in a bustle of preparing for it.

What a bustle there was! What a getting out of best ware and a putting up of fresh hangings! What a polishing of pewter and even of chairs—just as if any would observe the looks of chairs on such an occasion! What a packing of the dower chest; there were tears as well as lavender laid up with the linen, April tears between joy and wistfulness, and homely gifts from homely friends, the pinner made by the old serving maid, Susan, as well as the good gear of the rich mistress's providing. Then there were bows to be tied and trimmings to be sewed and the considering of gowns by everything female under the roof. I say nothing of the confecting that went on for days before; nor yet of the vintner's considerations among his wines and the selection he made and remade with much serious thought before the day itself came.

At last the day did come. They began it early, the apprentices first, they and others, led by Jackman who had a musical turn, sang the bride at break of day. Afterwards they went to clear out the great cellar beneath the house, covering the noble casks which stood in remote corners and might not be moved, with carpets, and hanging garlands from the roof where before there had been cobwebs. But early as they were, Susan was not much after. She came in good time to greet the bride; to bring her a little bunch of rosemary, rue and the bridal myrtle, tied with a happy wife's stay string so as to hand the good luck on. Afterwards she was to be heard below, as busy over affairs in the house as the apprentices were with their part. The lawyer's maid, loaned for the occasion, and others loaned or hired, were not long in coming to her aid, and Mistress Shipp not long in coming to supervise. And when she was down, the household was quickly astir; the girls and the master and even the bride.

Dressing was a serious business of the day; the girls started betimes, for there was to dress the bride and then

each had to put on her own best clothes. Keren had a new gown for the occasion. Thomas Ashe had given Mistress Shipp money to purchase one for her when they left Lowhole—a not unwarranted extravagance, seeing the paucity of her wardrobe. It had but come from the tailor's two days ago and was now found to be short of a lace. A pity, Betty cried; but Millander, practical still although a bride, found an old one and all agreed it need not show did they let fall the edge of the lace kerchief, Lady Belton's gift. Kate had a new dress too; hers was discovered tight, though likely so made by her own commanding; so tight that it was a wonder she could breathe. This did not concern the others, for Kate had a little chamber within that of her uncle and aunt and attired herself there in state, with Livvy, a young wench, niece of Susan, to fetch and carry and fasten her to—the last a thing which took some doing, and broke the maid's nails. Betty wore the gown Millander had for Peg's wedding two years ago; it had been let out, for Betty was of plumper build, and re-made and trimmed with something new, a sarsenet with flowers on it, very neat. It became Betty vastly; as also did the jewel she wore, a round ornament of lapis lazuli, blue as the sky and of the shape of a pigeon's egg and about the bigness; a treasure usually kept locked up, of which more by and by.

In good time all assembled in church, bridegroom and bride and friends, father and mothers, both the two, and the families besides. They all assembled in the church of St. Botolph and there the ceremony was performed. It was not convenient, seeing the acts still in force, for Tobiah to wed the couple in the eye of the law; but it was possible for him to exhort them afterwards, and to pronounce them man and wife in the eye of God and the assembled company—this in the house of the vintner, where the whole party repaired after church. The number there present might make prayer and preaching illegal (unhappy time when to pray and to preach could be illegal acts!), but it was not likely that any would be called into question for this assemblage.

Accordingly, then, behold the wedding party, newly returned from church, gathered in the vintner's cellar. The bride and bridegroom in seats of honour, she with a cushion for her feet to keep her fine slippers from the flagged floor, though one knows it was clean enough for there to be no need for that. Mistress Stettin, on the couple's right, with Simon Shipp beside, and Betsy, wiping her eyes to so soon lose the second daughter, not far off. Simon's sister Rachel was there and Mistress Stettin's married daughter and her husband and eldest boy. Of course Cousin Jake, and another cousin, a sea-captain whose ship luckily had come into the river three days ago. There were the lawyer and his wife and pretty Julia too, and some other maid—or maids; and Jackman, one thinks, and probably Reuben from the potter's and others. One could not be sure of all the young folks; they sat on the carpet-covered casks or on benches in the shadowy corners; one did not know how many there were, only saw young faces in the half obscurity between the garlands and hanging wreaths.

To this company Tobiah spoke, choosing as the text of his discourse words from Ecclesiasticus: "*In three things I was beautiful, and stood up beautiful both before God and man: the unity of brethren, the love of neighbours, a man and wife that agree together,*" with special reference to the last and some enlargement on the command of St. Paul: "*Let the husband render due benevolence unto the wife, and the wife unto the husband.*" From these heads he spoke of the beauty of unity, the need of charity and the duty of forbearance of one with another, both between neighbours, friends, families and those in the nearer relation into which the young people were newly contracted; not omitting to mention some of the smaller evils whereon the ships of well-being, domestic and otherwise, have been wrecked.

After which all to table.

Of the feast there is no need to speak, though it was notable and worthy of the occasion and Betsy Shipp; and accompanied by wines, a credit even to that house, of reputation in half the county. It was a mighty affair, with

that to satisfy the nice, who can only fancy dainties, as lamprey pie or fine syllabub and the choicest bride-cake; and that which would fill the appetite of the young and hungry and the greedy old with few interests left beyond their food. There was enough and to spare for all, and for all the servants in the house—and there were a many from one family and another, and for the poor who had gathered about the door; aye, and to leave a good balance over then.

After the feast the young folk went to dance in the great cellar, cleared now of seats and everything excepting only the casks where fiddlers were ready with their bows. Simon, being of the severer sort, did not all approve dancing, as savouring too much of levity and worldliness; and his sister Rachel approved still less. But Mistress Shipp thought no harm of it; rather, she held one should dance at a wedding, and, further, that it were well for young folk to be merry under the good consent of their elders.

So they danced at Millander's wedding, Julia with Richard and afterwards with Sim—one thinks she preferred Sim, for which small blame to her. Betty had the Cousin Jake and the captain cousin and Jackman, she condescended to give him a hand—and there was not much condescension about it—and afterwards others; there was not time to give them all a turn. Keren had her partners; Reuben was the chief of them and the one that fitted best. Like herself, he was something of a novice at such scenes and less eager to dance than to tell of his work, and his dream of one day being an artist indeed and mounting beyond the painting of ware. One with another, dancing and chatting, whispering in corners and laughing as they stepped out to take the floor, they all kept going; there was only one thing to regret, that the time was so short.

Betimes the bride and bridegroom must start for Blue-Pale since they would get there before dark. The young folk conducted them on their way; the girls to the edge of the town; the youths somewhat further, to where the roads divide beyond the Abbey field. There they gave a last farewell, a rousing "good luck" which made the air ring.

They stood to call it through curved hands after the decked conveyance which was bearing the couple home; then turned and set off at a run back to the town. If they ran hard enough there was just a chance, they might catch up with the girls and the elders of their own sex, who had been left to escort them, before they reached the vintner's door. And, strange to say, they did it, though the distance was considerable; they caught up with them quite a long way from the vintner's, and took quite a long time to traverse that last bit when they had joined together.

CHAPTER VIII

OF THE WINTER IN COLCHESTER

SIMON SHIPP was to go to London at the beginning of the winter, partly on business, partly to take his second son, Sim, and install him with a Portugal merchant in the City; one with whom he himself did good trade and in whose counting-house it was expected Sim would ultimately grow wealthy and wise in the ways of commerce. Simon desired to be in London by early December, so as to be able to be home again before Christmas time, the merry-making at which feast his conscience did not approve, though his tradesman's mind did; for it was sufficiently kept up in the town to make his trade brisk. So he was planned to go to London by early December, and Mistress Shipp was warned to have Sim ready by then. There was a good deal to do for this, shirts to be made and bands to be stitched; some ruffles too. Betsy would have her boy make his start in London well equipped, even if a shade smarter than his father's principles approved.

When the wedding was fairly over and the household settled down again Mistress Shipp and the girls sewed busily for Sim. Day after day they sat in the pleasant parlour, where whatever sun there was came in, and chatted as they sewed. Or, when Mistress Shipp thought they had chatted enough, or that the talk was growing spiteful or otherwise unedifying, she would bid Kate read to them from some profitable book or Betty say a psalm. This till the light failed, when they would lay aside their work a while and perhaps tell a tale in the firelight; and when candles were lit, stitch again, or play some innocent game with the brothers and Julia or another, should such happen to be there. A happy life of small things: small frets, of course,

and small pleasures too; more pleasures than frets, many more; and good hearts and cheerful countenances to help the one and overlook the other.

And in all Keren had a share, though perhaps she saw more than she truly bore a part. She sewed with the best of them, almost the best of them; and though at first she knew no psalm, having been but ill taught, she speedily learnt, and when she said one the words stayed in the minds of those who heard with a weight, and sometimes a meaning they had not heretofore had. It is true she could not play as the others did at candle-time—to play, I think, is a thing one must learn young; but in so far as she could, she bore her part and was well content. Her sojourn at the vintner's had been happy enough, and for some at least of the family she had conceived a sincere affection, and to most gratitude for kindness. But the time was drawing to an end now; she was to go when Simon went to London; he was to take her with him to his daughter, Peg, in Lombard Street; there her father was to come, or send, to fetch her. The season was late for travelling; but the journey to London was an easy one, the road good, the coach traversing it in two days now, with a night between at Chelmsford, where the Shipps had friends. From London to Lowbole, though a much shorter distance, not a third of the way, was likely to be bad going, it is true. Still, one who knew the road and started betimes might do it before dark even at this season, on a fair day; and, as Mistress Shipp said, Keren and whoever came to fetch her could stay at Peg's and wait till the weather mended if it was bad at first.

So all was arranged; but so it did not befall.

A week before the time of starting there came letters from Thomas Ashe; one for Betsy Shipp and one within for Keren.

Keren's letter was of no great length:—

My Daughter,—

I would have you know by these that I desire you should not return at the present. I have that which is likely to carry me

abroad for a season—of what duration I cannot forecast: nor, indeed, the date of my departure, which may be delayed, though likely to befall during the winter. I have provided that you remain for the time either with my cousin Shipp, as now, or else under care of Joan, who retires to her kin at Maldon, and is prepared there to receive you till my return. In neither case are they chargeable, monies being placed for your maintenance according as I have writ my cousin Shipp, with whom decision lies. I trust you are in health. Farewell. May what Powers there be have you in keeping.

*Your Father,
Thomas Ashe.*

So Keren read, and stood a moment.

She was exiled from home, from the one only place with which she was kin. The feeling gripped her suddenly. She had been contented enough to be here, contented enough when the time came to go; looking upon it somewhat as one looks upon a pleasant halting place upon a journey, and the folk as one might chance-met, agreeable travellers. She was a stranger here, a sojourner, no more; always she had been that, under all looking to the return; to going back to Lowbole and the stone room, where strange work was done, and to the trees, her friends; to returning where she belonged as inevitably as beast to its hole. Now—

She read the letter again with a beating heart, a momentary fear coming over her that there was to be no return. But, no, it did not say that. A sober second reading showed it only a command for her to remain for the winter, while her father perfected some work and after, went a journey in connexion with it. That was all. Not what she would have chosen, how little she would have chosen it none knew; but not fearful and no matter for rebellion. She never thought to rebel; she was not a rebellious sort, strangely docile where she thought she could obey; nor did she think to protest or complain as Betty, or Julia, or Kate in her place, would have done. The thing was inevitable; there was no choice but to obey; Betty, Julia and Kate in her place would have obeyed, they were dutiful girls; the difference between them and her was that

she made no protest about it. When, if ever, the time came for her to protest—to herself or another—then the time might also have come for her not to obey.

Below stairs Mistress Shipp read her letter and with her husband discoursed upon it. There was never any question as to how she would decide; had Keren been left penniless upon her hands she would still have readily kept her. "Now Millander's gone," she said, "the house is half empty of girls. I take it kindly of my cousin Ashe to let us bid Keren stay the winter through."

Simon might not have taken this view had there been no moneys; indeed, one is pretty sure he would not. As it was, however, and as Ashe had arranged all without niggardliness, and with a clearness as rare as commendable in a learned man, he had no objections to offer. He agreed with his wife that it was well, their duty, to have Keren remain and not to send her to Joan at Maldon.

Not so Mistress Rachel Shipp, who was that day bidden to the vintner's house. This Rachel, a virgin of years, was she who almost persuaded Tobiah to the advisability of matrimony—for others—by demonstrating to what some women grow who lack it. The letter being but newly arrived when she came that day she heard all about the proposal for Keren to stay. She did not at all approve. In the times she had been to her brother's house since Keren's coming, she had conceived a considerable dislike and distrust of the girl; both of which sentiments were helped by Kate, her special favourite, who feared and disliked Keren very heartily.

"You'll regret it," the spinster said when she heard the decision; "mark my words, you'll regret it. I wouldn't keep the girl if I were you; no, I certainly would not! If you do, you will see, you may keep her altogether! You can perceive the father's trick, he means to saddle you with her. What's he to do with a big grown girl in a lonely wood? He can't marry her there; you may do that for him, or keep her yourself till he claims her again, which he won't speedily do. One can see how he thinks."

Simon Shipp rubbed his chin. This idea had not before occurred to him, and, though it was unpleasant and consequently worthy his consideration, it did not seem in all ways likely in the light of the very clear and good arrangement Ashe had made. He spoke of this arrangement now and of the money, which had not been heretofore mentioned to Rachel.

"Oh!" she said when she heard, and minutely inquired particulars.

"H'm!" she said when she had them and "Ah!" with evidently a better opinion of Ashe.

But she still held to it that her brother and his wife were unwise to keep the girl with their young ones. "I would not keep her," she said. "If I had sons and daughters I would not have her with them; no, not if I were paid a hundred pounds! But—"

But Betsy did not agree, and she said so. She certainly did not agree with Rachel's next words, which were a proposition that she herself should take Keren. As a woman alone, the spinster said, she could venture to take her; there were no young ones in her house to be hurt by the company, and she concurred with her sister-in-law that, seeing the girl's lonely plight, they were bound as Christians to do what they might for her.

Betsy was emphatically against this. "If we don't keep her," she said, "she's to go to the Widow Joan, my cousin says so, and we must do as he says. But we are not sending her to that, are we, Simon?" (The worthy woman had a quite unwarrantably poor opinion of Joan.) "The girl's a good girl, as well behaved and willing as I ever wish to see, though not so merry as most; she's more serviceable a deal than feather-pate Betty, and more patient and willing to give up than poor little Kate. And as for lads—she doesn't heed them at all. There's no trouble with her."

"H'm!" said Rachel; then she leaned forward and in an ominous voice asked: "Who was her mother? Sister Shipp, can you tell me that? Who was the girl's mother?"

"Her mother?" Mistress Shipp said. "Why, a foreigner my Cousin Ashe wed abroad, so I've heard, though I really don't know; I only know that the poor soul died when her girl was a babe. God pity her for it, poor heart!"

Rachel sniffed a little, but returned to her point. "I can tell you more than that," said she; "her mother was a gipsy!"

Simon started and Betsy too; neither of them had heard of this before; Kate, who had overheard Keren tell Betty, had not conveyed it to them as to her Aunt Rachel.

"A gipsy, brother!" Rachel went on, satisfied with the impression she had made. "An Egyptian, a stroller; a woman, without doubt, no better than she should be, even if there is nothing darker to allege, and there may well be, seeing that Thomas Ashe himself is openly avowed an alchemist, if not a worker in forbidden things."

She was going on to smell full-fledged witchcraft, if not in the begetting of the child, at least about her cradle; but Simon cut her short. The first news was bad enough to him; he was of the respectable, shop-keeping, hearth-holding sort, to whom the vagabond peoples are anathema, and those who diverge from the common way, rightly or wrongly, a disgrace.

"Where had you this?" he asked. "I should have had word before"—he turned upon his wife—"I should have been told! Is it true, think you, Rachel? A gipsy, a vagabond woman, perhaps not properly wed! A pretty thing! This should have been looked to, Betsy!"

He was a good deal flustered, blaming Ashe, blaming the woman unknown, and Betsy, too, for her remissness in not searching the matter out before bringing the daughter of the couple here.

But Betsy was not greatly put about, neither by him nor Rachel. She soothed him according to her wont, and then said cheerily that it were easy to discover who the mother was by asking, and until they were resolved of that there was no cause to fret. "Though gipsy or no gipsy,"

so she concluded, "whatever the mother, it won't make the girl different from what we've found her, and that's as deft a maid and as docile as one need want to see."

With that she went to the door and called for Keren.

But Keren, as we know, could not give much account of her mother. That she had heard tell she was a gipsy, she could say; that her father had met her in Bohemia or some place not distant from it; that he had wed her according to the customs of her people and also the legal rites of the land. But beyond that nothing, except that she had died when Keren herself was but eighteen months old; though that also she had on hearsay only, not direct from her father. This was all she could tell the three elders when they questioned her; and all she could hold out any hope of their getting, for it was not likely Ashe would break his silence for them, even were it possible for them to get to question him.

One can believe the vintner was not satisfied with such scant information. He said so several times; when, after some useless cross-questioning, Keren had been dismissed.

But Betsy took a more hopeful view. "It's clear she was born in wedlock," she said, "and clear the mother was a foreigner—which shows she wasn't of the vagabonds and dog-stealers often called gipsies in his country. As like as not she was a great person in her own country. There were gipsy queens in foreign parts. I used to sing a song of one." She hummed a stave of the song and asked Simon if he remembered. She used to sing it in their courting days, which helped him to remember, also perhaps to agree that the unknown Mistress Ashe might have been a royal wanderer. "Anyway and anyhow," she concluded, "the girl's a good girl when all's said and done."

She came back to that; and, in a little, Simon came back to the money in the same way. Both were solid arguments and irrefutable, no matter what Rachel might have to suggest about people dead or events past.

The three sat in conclave a while; they were shut in together for some time after Keren was dismissed. Kate, a

desperately curious creature, wondered and wondered what they could be saying. They were speaking of Keren, she was sure; they had sent for her, and now, afterwards, must be talking about her. She greatly longed to know what the matter was; she would have listened at the door while Keren was within had she dared, for the edge of her ordinary curiosity was sharpened by spite; but she knew it unsafe with Keren near. She had to contain herself till Keren came out; indeed, till she was safely gone forth to walk with Betty. Then, however, she ventured to approach and put her ear to the crack. The first words she heard were unexpected and seemed to her to have no possible concern with Keren.

"The sin of witchcraft is not stamped out of the land," she heard her Aunt Rachel say in the high, strained tone in which she denounced sins or pronounced coming wrath or kindred things. "You can call to mind, brother, if you try, the trial of the Suffolk witches and the stir there was in men's minds then; also matters that afterwards came to light, not here nor there only but in many spots. The talk may have died down in these days and the terrible infection of the sin be something less hot in this part, specially blessed of the Providence of God. But it is not gone from the land, the Devil is still among us, most among us when, waxing careless in security, men neglect to set a watch. The evil is broken out again, I am told, in the northern parts of this country, and in that New England beyond the sea, to which godly men have banished themselves for conscience' sake, and where it would seem the Devil is now making no common stand to establish his own."

"Nay, truly, sister? Do you say so?" Mistress Shipp said, though without the deepest interest. She was one whose kingdom being bounded by the neighbours, had not the greatest interest in far tales.

Simon, however, so far shared his sister's gloomy fears and fervour in inquiring into matters of evil, that he discovered considerable interest in the subject. Between

them they recalled the famous trial of the Suffolk witches, Amy Dunny and Rose Callender, for bewitching children and young girls; recounting what came out at the time, the strange way the accused plagued their victims, the pains they gave or took away at a touch, and other of their evil and mysterious deeds. Afterwards Rachel, who was stored with such things, recounted other allegations made against other witches in different parts of the country; speaking very fearfully and gloomily and with heavy sense of the singular and special power of the Devil at this time.

Kate, without the door, listened with all her ears; finding, as such sickly do, her parallel in every suffering cited. I do not know that without Rachel's help she would have put an interpretation on the incident of the cat bite at Blue-Pale and sundry incidents since, when her pains and complaints had dwindled beneath Keren's too keen eyes. But with that help she easily did. Rachel, who did not know of the affair, could not have had it in her mind; the words she spoke to Mistress Shipp, which were overheard by the listening Kate, were based on no special incident, on parentage rather.

"I would not speak ill of your relative, Sister Shipp," she said, "far be it from me to speak ill of any one, least of all cast any slur on a young maid confided to our care; but it is but right to beware, to be on guard for others, even while, in the name of the Lord, facing all things a Christian ought for oneself. For this reason I say—I cannot but say—here is at least a possible vessel for the Evil One. The mother a gipsy, of the people long known for their dealings with darkness; the father a worker in curious arts, if not a wizard; the two coupled by some unholy rite; the child—the Devil is likely to wrestle strongly for the child. There are not wanting signs already in her that he has even now some power there!"

"No, now!" Betsy cried, shocked. "Now you talk foolishly, sister! Dearie me, to think a lone woman's loneliness should bring her to that! You bring to my mind, sister," she said, "the goody, who, having just

gotten a cock and two hens, raised a whole brood of chicks and from them earned a new shift in her own mind, all in half an hour; only your brood's more ugly than hers, and your shift too, for it's a short shift you'd wish poor Keren. And all because she's heard that her mother comes of gipsy folk, and she can't show the marriage lines by which her parents were wed. Not likely that she should! I'm sure my girls'll not have mine to show while I or their father live!"

With that she rose up and bustled about refreshment, and Kate, fearing to be caught, had to move from the door. Though it is likely there was little more of interest to hear, for the refreshments were very good, as comfortable to the body as was Betsy's wholesome mind to the soul; and if Rachel was not convinced by the one she was at least fed with the other and so silenced. As for Simon, however gloomy his view of the world and the power of the Devil, he was a sound man where money was concerned, also so attached to his wife that he would meet her where he could. The two together were likely to be stronger than Rachel's fears of witchcraft.

At all events, not a word was said in public about this talk, and nothing whatever about Keren's going away. Indeed, it was finally declared that very evening she was to stay in the household all winter, which announcement gave great satisfaction to Betty.

Thus it befell that Keren remained in Colchester when Simon went to London. Sim went with his father, taking the shirts and all the other things which his mother's thought had provided securely packed in a box fitted with lock and key. He took also her blessing and prayers, we may be sure. And the man who doubts but what such are efficacious is the veriest heathen and atheist, unfit for the service of men or company of honest beast. The girls bade Sim farewell, Julia as well as those of the house, and each stuffed somewhere among his gear her little keepsake and gift. Susan, who had held him in her arms as a babe, had something to add, and, on the last morning, kissed him by

the kitchen door, which embarrassed him somewhat, but not much. They went to the inn to see the coach start; it ran twice a week now, even in the winter time. Sim, looking back, saw them, bright-faced from the tingle of the frost in the air, Betty and Julia, Keren and Kate, with his mother standing beside. And the thought of them and that they wished him well and expected well of him doubtless helped him sometimes to play the man; such things do; so we, too, will wish him well, for he goes away out of the story here.

Thus the winter settled in. A winter not particularly noteworthy. There was some frost and some snow, not a great deal, and an early break up with a promise of a moist and forward spring. Of happenings there were none of great moment. There was a pump set up at the head of the cross street that goes down to the river, very handsome, and convenient for folk in the vicinity. One Wright, a tailor and a sober man, saw the Devil come out from the castle ruins on the night before Epiphany; the which made some talk at the time, but afterwards died down, no other seeing it, and nothing occurring in connexion therewith. Trade in the town was looking up; the havoc wrought, both to buildings and commerce by the disastrous siege in the Civil War, was much recovered by now. During the winter there was plenty doing, some men waxing careless and forgetful of the hand of the Lord, late heavy upon them, in this newer prosperity.

In the vintner's household, also, nothing of moment occurred. One of the plates of the best ware, that which had belonged to Mistress Shipp's great aunt, was broken; this in a mysterious way, it was said by the cat, though Keren had more than a suspicion that cat's name was Kate. Susan's niece, Deliverance Hobbs, she who had come to help at the time of the wedding, was hired to come every day, for Susan was getting on in years and felt the weather. A while before Christmas the vintner came back from London with the record of good business done, Sim well established and much news—that of the

Court, the Town and the Parliament—all bad, of course. There are some men who, did they glean news of the Court of Heaven and the Parliament of Angels, would come home convinced that the City of New Jerusalem and the Promised Land were going swift to destruction. Not but what matters political in England were truly ill at that season, though not greatly concerning to the smaller people. But well-founded or ill-founded, the reports did not move Mistress Shipp much. She listened, as a good wife should, and vaguely shook her head when Simon did; but she did not sleep the less well for any talk of King or counsellors. What did concern her, however, was another ill report Simon brought—that of Peg's health. Peg, he said, was ailing; she was not what she had been. He was uneasy for her, and his accounts, and one may be sure his wife cross-questioned him properly, were such as to make her uneasy too. She wrote a lengthy letter, praying for more news, also giving much advice. Later she sent tried remedies by one she knew who chanced to be journeying to London; though, as she said, there was little comfort in that; a sight of Peg would have told more than all the letters in the world, and a talk with her would have done more curing than an apothecary's shop of remedies. But since those things could not be, they could not. She made the best of a bad job, sent the remedies and some fine quince jelly, and strove not to be anxious.

Thus the winter wore through, with, as I say, nothing of much moment happening in the vintner's household.

But at the turn of the year something did happen. Mistress Shipp was called to London. Peg, so her husband wrote, was seriously ill. She had ailed all the winter, as the mother had feared (and inly knew), now she had taken a turn for the worse. Her husband began to fear for her and, in this extremity, sent for Mistress Shipp, for whom, indeed, the young wife had long yearned.

One can guess that at this call Betsy went. There was no preparing, no laying away of that and getting out of this, as before the great journey of the summer. There

was just a bundling together of what was necessary; and it was by Keren's doing chiefly that what was necessary was there, and a going to-day, for it was to-day the coach went, and it was that which mattered, not the rain and the heavy February roads. There was no planning for all likely and unlikely contingencies of the household, as when the house mistress went before. She had neither time or thought for that, only a few orders to Susan or to Keren, and these arising chiefly because Keren said, "I will do this," or "We will see that is done." Had it not been for Keren, Betsy afterwards said, she did not know how she should have gone. Simon was flustered and distressed; he was always put about by an emergency, also he was very busy by reason of the illness of one of his men. Betty was much distressed too, and wept for her sister and her mother's going. Susan wept with her and feared for the worst. Keren did not weep; she remembered things forgotten, packed what was needful and started Mistress Shipp, sufficiently wrapped, on her journey. Afterwards she saw to the ordering of the household in a quiet and complete way.

There is very little doubt but what the vintner's household could have been managed by Keren and old Susan till the mistress' return, did Keren stay so long, even though that return was not until May. But the vintner did not think so and sent for his sister Rachel.

"I can't be left with no one here," he said pettishly, as one completely overwhelmed with the cares of the household and his trade too. As, indeed, he was, being one who took over packs of cares on the first opportunity, notably ones in which he had no concern. He had no concern in the matters of the household and need have had none; but he felt that he had, and said it, and also that the supervision of young maids was more than a man, with his day's work, should have. Accordingly he wrote to Rachel to come.

As it happened, however, Rachel was from her lodging at the time. She had lately fallen much under the in-

fluence of the preacher, Samuel Calderbeck; and with him, and certain of his following, she was at that season among the coast villages praying and preaching and testifying to the ship-builders and waterside folk (who certainly were in need of some such, though not much the better for these). By reason of this and there being some difficulty in finding her exact whereabouts, it was a little before Simon's letter reached her. And it was a little more before she could come, for the roads in that low-lying district are very bad, near impassable after a wet February, and she was so timid of water she would not venture to make the journey to town by boat.

Thus it happened that for a little Keren and Susan remained in charge. Susan reigned in the kitchen and store room and larder and gave an eye to the lads; Keren elsewhere, though perhaps truly, if invisibly, she reigned in these too. At all events, under the reign a strange sort of quiet, not, one fancies, of Susan's inspiring, spread over the house.

One felt it even when one opened the door, a sense of silent working, of things done of themselves or as a matter of course, without talk or stir; nothing said, but nothing missed or lost; an exact happening to time—as befell in processes of the Art in the stone room at Lowbole. The vintner, fussy at first and gloomy though he was by reason of the loss of his wife's cheer, became peaceful under it, soon ceasing to fidget or to be tyrannical in the house—nothing there befell or was spoke of to rub him the wrong way. Keren, who knew his mind, stood between him and such and made all smooth. Betty was subdued and a trifle sad, but important and soberly satisfied; she felt she was in a place of trust now her mother was away; she was a woman, with a woman's cares, and must do her duty as such. Only Kate rebelled, finding no place for herself; and also finding, as the others did not, Keren in all, and disliking and fearing her for it even more than of old. Of this Keren was not aware, nor would have cared had she been; she went about the business of the household,

doing what she deemed fit without reference to Kate or another.

It chanced that she deemed it fit to put away the best ware; holding it safer, in the mistress's absence, in the cupboard in Mistress Shipp's room than on a dresser within reach of the mysterious cat. Accordingly she herself put it there; this on a day not long before Rachel came.

The cupboard was high; she had to stand on a stool to reach the top shelf, so she had Deliverance stand below to hand up the plates. It was also near the window, which looked out on to the street; and Livvy, though a good little maid, was young and so could not resist looking out between handing the ware.

"La!" she cried once. "There's my lady, I declare! Lady Belton!"

"What?" Keren said, and stayed with a plate in her hand.

"Lady Belton," Livvy said. "Have you not heard? No, but how would you—" There had been curiously little talk of the neighbours and gossip and such in the house since Keren came to control.

"My grandfather holds it a shame," Livvy ran on; "as if Colchester were a rebellious city!"

Her grandfather had in his youth fought among the Ironsides and was as stout a God-fearing man as ever revolted against tyranny and iniquity in high places. The which inclined him the more to resent that the present King had such an opinion of Colchester as to request Sir James Belton to dwell there and keep an eye, *ex officio*, on the good people of the town. But this His Majesty had done; in consequence, Sir James, my lady and following were come to an old house Sir James had inherited from his mother and which stood in the heart of the town. This news was some days old; but, though doubtless it had been discussed over the vintner's counter, it had not yet reached through to the girls. Livvy gave the first word of it now, while Keren put away the plates and while my lady tarried a minute at the end of the street.

"She'll be by soon," Livvy said; "you'll see her then."

"I've seen her before," Keren answered; "before I came here."

Livvy did not hear; she was craning to the window. "See," she cried, "she is coming! And Sir James with her. No, not Sir James: I think; not quite so fine, but a properer man!"

She stretched right forward to get a view, but at that moment Susan called. "Is that Mrs. Susan calling?" she said reluctantly.

It was.

"You had best go," Keren said.

Livvy went.

But Keren stood where she was, hid by the open cupboard door should any look up from the street, which no one did, neither my lady nor Masterton, who rode by her side.

Keren looked at them from over the cupboard door; most principally she looked at Masterton: at his fine shoulders and firm seat, a man every inch of him, finely bred and at ease; at the way he bent to the lady with the remembered deference and sudden softening smile, with tenderness in the bend of the head and passion, held in check, in the curve of the hand; a lover, every inch of him, though decently masked.

As they came level with the house he glanced casually up, a glance which did not go beyond the pane and passed as it came, seeing nothing. Keren saw; and it was as if a shutter went down and she saw through into the soul. She saw the whole man, not the shell only, as formerly, but the whole, neither better nor worse than it was, all revealed.

For a long minute she looked. That, then, was what she had thought she loved!

Later she finished putting away the plates; she stacked them so well she had space to spare.

CHAPTER IX

OF THE COMING OF ZACHARY WARD TO WYTHES HALL

THAT spring Zachary Ward came to Wythes Hall. He came at the end of an afternoon in March, when there was a taste of salt in the shrewd wind which blew across the mere and a streak of lemon-coloured sunset gleaming behind the leafless trees of the wood beyond the house. The gates of the Hall were, as last summer, in need of paint; still more than they were last summer, for the winter's weather had worn off what little there was. So far Madam had not seen fit to have any laid on; it was hardly likely she should yet. Squire Ward had not been long dead, she not a month in command.

The drive about the gate was neglected and weed-grown, but further on in better state. Near the house there were not wanting signs that efforts were being made to give it some look of care. The house itself, a plaster-built place of no very great size, was clearly inhabited. There was smoke issuing from more than one chimney and other signs that the family were in occupation. However, Zachary went half about it, in spite of this. He went slowly, examining with quick eyes, though even more with other senses, and perhaps with memory most of all. On the far side, where the ground sloped away to the reedy mere, he paused. There was a line of poplars here. One knows the smell of poplar buds in March, there is no other smell quite like them, and the sound of marsh birds talking at sunset, and the caw of homing rooks among leafless elms. A man does not forget these, nor the slope of the open land in the pale March light, nor the taste of the thin air

keen from the distant sea. Zachary drew in his breath and his eyes for a moment were darkly blue.

Just behind him a door in the house stood open. By and by he turned and went in unbidden. Inside the light was not strong; he stumbled over a velvet-cushioned chair near the entrance, and cursed it, more for the velvet cushion than the stumble. Then he set the thing in place. Clearly Madam was in residence. The house was redolent of her, as it had been when he was last here, years ago.

There was a step on the path without, a hurried step as if one, who had seen his entry from afar, hastened in consequence.

He glanced out. An imposing lady approached. One past middle age and of impressive aspect, though still handsome in serener moments, of which, however, this was not one.

Zachary held the door politely. "I am fortunate," he said with every appearance of being charmed to see her. "This is a happy meeting."

She stopped, and her face, a little pale at sight of him, turned deeply red. "You!" she managed to say. "You!" That was all for the moment.

Zachary bowed as if acknowledging recognition. "I have the honour," he said.

The red in her face deepened and she swallowed, almost as if she feared an apoplexy.

For a moment or so they stood fronting one another, then: "Right, Madam," Zachary commended as if she had spoken. "It were a mistake to deny the identity; I agree with that. The time has gone for saying, 'This is not Zachary Ward!' His father knew him as such last summer and all the times they met since. You, too, acknowledged him and the reconciliation between them by the compliment of a perfectly natural disapproval. You can't now say, 'This is not Zachary Ward.' You have my sympathy, but you really cannot say it."

The lady's eyes flashed; she had regained control of herself. "No one could mistake you for another," she

said disdainfully; "your first words would betray who you are."

"Madam," Zachary said sweetly, "may I return the compliment?"

She flushed again. She had tricks of speech, acquired in homely-bred youth, of which she was ashamed and had largely overcome, but which in moments of excitement were apt to show. She was as disproportionately angry that they should be recalled as folk are for a small goad added to a great offence.

"Insolence!" she cried, and, pushing at him before he had time to move, "Let me pass!" she said.

He held the door for her with an extreme of courtesy which still further incensed her, as of old he had ever the power to do. When she was within, however, she commanded herself and, speaking with hauteur, demanded: "Why are you here? Do you think that now the Squire, for a year in his dotage, is at last dead, you will be admitted here? Why have you come?"

"Oh, Madam!" Zachary said, as one who gently reproaches. "And to the eldest son! It's 'Why have I not come before?' surely not 'Why have I come now?' I'd have been with you before, dear lady, had I had the news of my father's death sooner; but I have been in Prague of late and held from news of home. I came so soon as I could. Ah, Nahum!"

An old man-servant, hearing voices, had approached in the passage way. "Still here, Nahum? And not so much older as I!" And Zachary shook the man by the hand, to the old fellow's plain joy.

"Master Zachary!" he cried. "Master Zachary! This is a sight!"

Madam's eyes glinted. She was not used to being overlooked by her servants, even Nahum, who had not the same respect for her as most. "If," said she to Zachary, and her voice rang harsh, "you have business with me or any matter of the estate you had best make it known to my man of affairs; or, if you desire to discuss it personally

with me, come on Thursday when he will be here; I will see you then, an hour before noon. Nahum, show the door."

"The pantry door, Nahum, and a draught of the old October," Zachary said. "Lord, what a brewer you were in the old days!" He clapped a hand on the old servant's arm and turned him about. "I'll wager you haven't lost your cunning there, nor yet in your other arts either."

The old sinner chuckled (he was one of the unregenerate, though a cheery sort) and suffered himself to be led down the passage.

Madam opened her mouth; but no words came. This defying, or rather, frank ignoring which hardly seemed aware it defied, in the house where she commanded, choked her speechless with sheer surprise as well as wrath. For a moment she stood as one who fights for breath; then she sank into the velvet-cushioned chair. She was a woman of full habit and violent passions, now advancing in years; to such sudden emotions, more especially of rage, tend towards vertigo, or even more serious fits. She sat a moment, her face deeply red, her eyes half closed.

Nahum's voice came to her with the opening of a door. "Aye, master," it said, "but I'd hardly believe the sluts, nor the men neither when they brought word o' last autumn that you were to and fro o' town; you and t'ode Squire friends as you should be. But I did say, 'If that's true we'll have him here yet!'"

The door shut and in the silence Madam fetched her breath. The danger of vertigo passed. In a little she rose and went into a room on the right. She had begun wrong, she knew it; but she had been taken by surprise, also it had ever been this man's faculty to induce this in her; in the distant time of his youth he had ever the faculty of rousing her to rage and so mistakes. Now, after these years, it was not less so. She realized the mistake she had made to-day and repented it; though principally she repented that she had not been in time to prevent him from entering the house at all as one who has right there. But

that could not be undone now, he was here, and here he must be dealt with. She did not doubt but what she could do it, although the situation did not sort so well with her temper as a refusal of admission, conveyed by a servant, or some similar humiliation. But seeing it was too late for that—it is possible it might always have been with this man, but that Madam did not admit—seeing it was she allowed the intrusion for the time being.

Thus it befell that that evening Zachary sat at table with the step-mother and her son and daughter. The son—Hugh his mother called him, but Zachary still, as years ago, Jacob—was a not ill-natured youth; young for his five-and-twenty years and weakish by reason of his mother's spoiling yet masterful treatment. He hardly knew what to do nor how to take the newcomer. Sometimes he was swayed by his mother and imitated her haughty manner; and anon, falling under the influence of Zachary's ease, treated him as relative and guest; perhaps more than a little charmed by the sense of the outer world and the feeling of man which he brought with him to the female-dominated atmosphere.

Mistress Clarinda was a different affair. She was darker in colouring than her brother, something of a beauty, as her mother had been, and with a hauteur which already equalled anything the elder lady had acquired. For Zachary she did not even show the sufferance her mother did; she ignored him as if he had not been there, which amused him much. He cocked an eyebrow at her when she talked to her mother; he knew that part of what she said was inspired by the presence she affected to ignore, and he listened and watched her airs with twinkling eyes. But he said nothing till in a pet she turned angrily from his regard. Then he remarked to Madam—

"Quite a pretty face! I congratulate you, dear Madam, on her charms; but you should not, if I may be permitted to say it, have the hair dressed so; it is no longer quite the mode and at the best could never have become one a trifle large in the ear."

Clarinda flushed angrily. "You are impertinent!" she cried; by this time her very skin tingled from his amused regard.

"How like the mother—in looks," he said with a complimentary smile.

Clarinda jumped to her feet. "How long is this person to remain in the house?" she demanded.

"Sit down," her mother said shortly; she knew by experience that "the person" was not one it paid to grandly ignore. "Do not show yourself ridiculous, Clarinda; he goes to-morrow."

The girl sat down sulkily. "I should hope so," said she, "and early too."

"We expect a guest to-morrow?" Zachary inquired. "So I heard. I am desirous to see him on more counts than one."

At this Clarinda turned upon her mother in indignant consternation. The idea of Zachary and this guest was preposterous; she said so in no measured terms. "He must be out of the house before they come," so she concluded with finality and Hugh, more mildly, added his quota.

"They're people of condition," he told Zachary with an eye on his apparel. "They haven't honoured us before; they never did in town, although it was their house we hired. You can't be here—"

"My coat?" Zachary inquired. "I have another. I have not always I own, but chance wills it that I have now. I spent the winter in Prague upon a matter of coinage for the Grand Duke; I was compelled to replenish my wardrobe somewhat or suffer it to be replenished for me. I assure you I can produce a coat, not mourning it is true—it was made ere the family had need for weeds—but that should commend it to you, for it would seem to show I am not nearly related to the house. It is, believe me, a coat worthy of Lady Belton, of Sir James and even the cousin Masterton."

He glanced towards Clarinda at the last; she did not

blush, but angrily turned her head. "As head of the house," he went on, "and the lady's eldest male kin, I should see this gallant before the preliminaries of courtship, on either part, are begun. Also, as I say, I desire to see him on another count."

Clarinda sprang to her feet again. "Will you suffer this?" she demanded of her mother, her nostrils quivering with rage.

Madam was but ill-pleased by the display; for one thing, it too nearly resembled what Zachary could rouse in herself; for another, she recognised that it in no way helped the situation, which must be dealt with other than by contempt and indignation at an unbidden return. As soon as possible she dismissed her son and daughter and prepared for business.

As soon as she was rid of them she opened. "I desire," said she, brushing preliminaries away, "to hear why you have come, and on what excuse you have thrust yourself unbidden here?"

"Without the man of affairs?" Zachary protested. "You would not hear me talk of claims and reasons without him? He comes on Thursday, the day after tomorrow; you would not have me speak without him and take advantage of a defenceless woman in my rude haste?"

"I—" Madam began, then bit back the reply which had risen to her lips; she was determined nothing should induce her to repeat her earlier mistake and treat him with other than the distant hauteur becoming to the mistress of the house and situation.

"There is no need to wait," she said, "we can discuss this alone; better alone, seeing it concerns you, a subject none so creditable that we need wish to take any into confidence. There is nothing, truly, to discuss, seeing the whole, and any right you may think you have to come here, amounts to nothing at all."

"How easily disposed of!" Zachary admired.

"It is easily disposed of," the lady retorted with irritation. "And you could be easily disposed of too. Did

I please, I could have you turned from the door like any vagabond among your fellows. However, seeing that, after all, you are my husband's son, I will hear what you have to say; but be brief, my patience has its limits."

"Madam," said Zachary with respect, "far be it from me to deny it."

"Speak then!" the lady commanded, with signs that the patience was giving way. "You have no right here, no right to come, no claim at all; say what you have to say and be done, or you will find that I will use the right I have and have you thrust from the door."

"What it is to deal with defenceless women!" Zachary said sadly. "What brutes it makes us men! I knew it would have been better to wait for the man of affairs; no man's to be trusted to deal fairly with a woman alone."

Madam's eyes gleamed. "For two pins"—the words almost rose to her lips—"I would clout your head!" But she drove them back and controlled the virago, which ever put her at a disadvantage with him, as it had put her in advantage in governing his father. "So," said she, "I may take it that you think you have some right here, some species of claim? Well, I can tell you that you have none, neither as eldest son nor under any will; you have no claim at all."

"No?" Zachary said. "And the will my father made in the winter soon after I last saw him?"

She eyed him a second. So he had information that there had been such! Not that it mattered, that knowledge was easily disposed of. "It was destroyed," she said. "A while after the folly of making he reconsidered, perceiving that it was neither right nor reasonable to bequeath Wythes Hall to you who had been nothing to him these many years. He had some idea of leaving a sum of money to you. I do not say that I approved it, or that I did not do my best to persuade him to make the sum as small as might be. I did; I do not pretend that you ever had my favour, or that my word was ever given for you as against my children. He had that idea at one time and would

possibly have carried it through had he not died, as he did, suddenly and before he had made up his mind what to do."

"Ah!" said Zachary.

She eyed him with disfavour and some doubt. This news brought the destruction of any hope he had and of the grounds on which he had intruded here; word of it should bring more and other emotions than was shown.

"If you think," said she, "that in these circumstances you can push a claim as heir-at-law, you are mistaken. There is the earlier will, the one made when you were first, and properly, dismissed the house. In that your name does not appear at all."

"Ah!" said Zachary again.

"Do you hear?" she asked. "Do you understand?"

"Not entirely," he answered; "but no doubt in the end I shall."

She flashed angry eyes on him. "What do you not understand?" she demanded. "Of what do you accuse me? Pray say it. I am an old woman, and it will be no surprise to me to hear myself and mine accused of such acts of fraud as you are familiar with in the company you keep, if not in your own deeds. Say what you will, do not spare, pray."

"There again!" sighed Zachary. "See what comes of discoursing on such things with frail woman unsupported! I feared I would take cruel advantage of the situation!"

Madam bit her lip. "Do you bait me further," said she viciously, "you will find I take advantage of my situation as mistress of this house, and have you out, even at this hour! I have heard you with more patience than enough, I will have no more. You have no claim; you have nothing to advance, not even your bare word, nothing but a wish, or perhaps a hope, poorly founded, that you might have inherited here. You can take that, if you please, to Jobbett, my man of affairs, you know where to find him; or to any attorney so little employed as to give you his time; but I will hear no more of it; it is done with for me."

"Is it?" Zachary inquired. At which, though she made as if she would rise, she settled down again.

Afterwards they talked some half hour more, though without advancing much. However, in the end, Madam seemed to think she had disposed of the matter—as, indeed, she had if Zachary had nothing further to urge, and it cannot be said he urged much, rather sat as one who listens, from politeness, to what another has to say. Which was a provoking attitude to an imperious mistress of the house dealing with what she deemed the intrusion of an unforgiven prodigal. But in spite of provocation, Madam held to the position, referring him finally to her man of affairs, and telling him that, though the house, seeing it had been his birthplace, should shelter him for the night, he must be gone in the morning.

She rose as she said the last, to mark the audience at an end. "I expect you to be gone first thing," said she.

"Do you?" he replied sweetly as he held open the door. "Now that surprises me. Had I been asked, I'd have said that was not what you expect at the back of your head."

She turned round angrily. "You'll go—" she began, voice raised and breast on the heave.

But he stayed her. "Dear lady," he said, "why not put it off till to-morrow? It'll keep, you know that; we've crossed swords before, you and I. Let me entreat you to bed now. You owe it yourself. Remember, you have company to-morrow. Ah, step-brother Hugh, I wondered if you had retired."

He turned to Hugh, who at that moment came out into the hallway. With no resistance Hugh suffered himself to be drawn back to the room from whence he had come; he had been pretty well kept from the society of any but the mildest of men by his mother's care; and, as before indicated, Zachary and the anathema under which he here lay, were not without attraction for him.

Madam stood for a minute at the foot of the stairs, struggling once more with the vertigo which commotion

of mind was apt to bring. When it was past she halted yet a trifle longer, partly from resultant weakness, partly from indecision. But in the end she went on, up; to send, she decided, were better than to go. On the upper floor she summoned a servant and sent him with a message to Hugh: "His mother desired to speak with him in her chamber. Let him come immediately as she was about to retire." That order would bring him, she was sure, and effectually end any sitting with Zachary.

And she was right; Hugh rose on receipt of the message.

"I'll be back in a twink," he said.

But Zachary bade good-night.

"Nay, stay for me," the younger urged; "I'll not be long."

Zachary, however, guessed otherwise. "Better make it good-night," he said, and moved to the door.

In the hall he said, "I'm inclined for another crack with old Nahum; the old fellow's not half talked himself out, nor I either; I'll to his lair and find him. Good-night, then, to you."

Hugh gave a good-night, though he was more than half decided to come down again when he had waited upon his mother, and join the two in Nahum's lair. However, he did not do it, his mother preventing; she bade him to bed in a way there was no gainsaying. As his room was close to her own, and as she had her door left on the jar, there was no going or coming without her knowledge. He retired obediently; he could not do anything else, though he felt rebellious. After all, the thought occurred in his slow brain, there might be some compensation for outcasts such as the one below; they had the freedom to come and go.

Below, Zachary sat with old Nahum and smoked the strong tobacco, brought by the smugglers (among whom the old man had his friends) to the Island that lay out beyond the marshes in Colne mouth. As they smoked they talked of many things, as two old friends may—of the frosts of last winter and the following, the new breeding

place of the duck and the reported obsequies of Squire, performed in London, where he had lived almost entirely of late years, to the scorn of Nahum. They also spoke of other things of more present interest; among them of the company coming to-morrow and the talk of a courtship which the servants had scented.

"Of how long standing is this business?" Zachary asked. "Has the gentleman been before? Is the affair of long standing?"

Nahum shook his head. "I don't reckon he's seen Missie above twice," he said; "and won't see her above twice more before he's noosed if Madam has her way. She knows her stuff, Madam does; she'll strike while the iron's hot and without givin' Missie time to show the cloven hoof."

Zachary laughed, though his eyes remained grave. "Is the iron now hot?" he asked.

Nahum hunched his shoulders as to say, "Who can tell?" "Missie's a comely wench," he said, "that's summat; and she's a pretty dower, that's more. Hosier Hackleback, down Chelmsford, left considerable. You mind he?"

Zachary did; at least he knew, as Nahum, that Madam came of the stock of the Hacklebacks, wealthy tradesmen in the county town. "So the old man left his money to Mistress Clarinda," he said, refilling his pipe. "And the gallant is none too well to do, and my lady and Sir James say it's time to settle; and, the young lady being reported willing, he's coming to look at the goods. That's how it runs, I suppose?"

Nahum nodded; he supposed so too, so far as he understood. "The devil give him luck of his bargain if he takes her," he observed, and that was all.

But Zachary thought of Keren in the Great Wood at Lowbole, and for a little he smoked in silence.

Nahum, however, was not inclined for silence; he had plenty to say. As he remarked sourly, there was plenty doing now: changes at the Hall as there never had

been in his time, or his father's either. A doing up here and a repairing there and a boatload of furniture come all the way by water from London.

"H'm!" Zachary said when he heard. "Does Madam purpose to become a county dame in her age? Or is all this only that we may satisfactorily dispose of our Mistress Clarinda? Certainly the young lady was not mated in town, for all her mother's efforts; and, certainly, with Sir James and Lady Belton, not to say Cousin Masterton, in Colchester, and perhaps other quality to be baited with the dower, there might be better angling here."

Nahum grunted. He was, as it were, left with the estate, it being provided under the old Squire's will that he was to remain for his life upon it; this in recompense of an earlier service. The which provision galled Madam, for Nahum was never too obedient to her; just as her new-found choice to live at the Hall galled him, used as he long had been to the liberty of the land and a nearly empty house. "She used not to have no fancy for the place," he grumbled. "Couldn't abear it. Never came near it if she could get her will—and she mostly did. But now it's all different; she's all for bein' here. Had her bellyful o' London, I s'pose, or found out the fine folks there'd had their bellyful o' her and wouldn't give her the notice she wants. 'T all events, she's stuck here fast 'nough now. Has parson by the skirts and the parish by the ears. My young master to be Squire, and Justice by and by, if ever you heard tell! Sheriff, I daresay, if she could get her way!"

Zachary began to see how that Wythes Hall, with the rights of marsh, mere and wood, which was what his father had one time designed for him, was of more value to Madam than he had looked for. She would, of course, have always got what she could for herself and her own, he knew that, but he had not looked that this part of the property would be of such use to her. It seemed that he was wrong, she had some use for it—and, moreover, had contrived to get it, or so it would appear now.

"What I say," Nahum growled, "is, where's the eldest come? What about him? Where's he to stand?"

Zachary shrugged. "That remains to be seen," he said, knocking the ashes from his pipe; "though, I own, there are not wanting signs that it may be much where he lately has—on his feet under open heaven."

He rose as he spoke; the hour was past midnight, more than time, he said, that all in the respectable household were a-bed and asleep.

Nahum chuckled; there is very little doubt but what there had been times when all in the household were not a-bed and asleep at a respectable hour; and there would be again, Madam notwithstanding. To-night, however, was not such an occasion, and the old man, taking a candle, lighted Zachary to his room.

It was the old room, the one that had been his in boyhood. A low room, something bare, and, by long disuse, in poor repair, the plaster cracking from the walls in a place and the worn board in the floor, which he remembered of old, looking still more worn, hardly safe now. Madam had not as yet thought fit to renovate here. Perhaps she would; perhaps she would order hangings from town for the bed and a velvet chair to be set beside it; or perhaps, more likely, she would put servants to lie here, did she remain in possession at the Hall. And, there was no blinking the fact—he saw it as plain as he saw the press where he had thrown his coat—there was more than a chance she would remain in possession. If what she had said was true, if the Squire's last made will was destroyed, and the first (as it certainly then would be) good at law, he had not a shadow of a legal claim. And there was little reason to doubt but that she had spoken truly. She might have suppressed the obnoxious will had she needed; he had, perhaps unjustly, but a poor opinion of her integrity; little doubt of her readiness but a good deal of her necessity. So far as he could see, there was small room for the felony. She could have induced the Squire to do the destruction, and either to rest content with the earlier will

or else to decide on some redistribution, which she herself would be careful to prevent him from ever putting into writing. An easy matter, he being a man little given to action, one whose time, even in younger days, was always to-morrow, and who in later, under influence of a masterful wife, was little inclined for anything that needed effort. There was only one thing which gave Zachary a doubt of the fair and legal destruction of the will by the maker himself, as set forth by his wife; that was her own manner, temper and dealings that day. These might be read by some as indication, if not of doubt as to her title, at least of a little uneasiness, a few qualms, a fear as well as dislike of another claimant. But equally, Zachary knew, they might only indicate that his old faculty for incensing her and putting her beside her usual self, was not gone; they might simply stand for extreme irritation and not for guilty conscience and faulty title at all. In any case, let the will have been destroyed by the Squire at Madam's prompting or by herself before or after his death, the end was likely to be the same. So far as he was concerned, there seemed likely to be but one end and he knew it.

He leaned out of the window looking across the mere towards the marsh, hardly to be seen in the darkness, the night being cloudy with big clouds hurrying fast in the upper sky. Below there was little wind, the air still, with the smell of water in it, and once the sound of life on the marsh, some bird stirring, sound only to be heard by an accustomed ear. His ear was accustomed, absence does not destroy such things; the sounds came back familiarly to him and the smell of the night and the feel of it, the old feel and the call there was in the dark.

Madam might, if she must, secure the Hall, she might even secure the rights of marsh, mere and wood; but she could not secure that—that was inalienable.

He left the window and went to bed.

CHAPTER X

OF THE GOING OF ZACHARY WARD FROM WYTHES HALL

MADAM was not, as a rule, an early riser; neither her habit of body nor the town life she had cultivated induced to it. On the morning after Zachary's coming, however, she was up betimes; and betimes despatched a groom to Colchester with a letter. If he went as quickly as he was bidden, and if Jobbett came back as quickly as he was likely to, he should be here well before the company came. With him here and a clear half-hour or more before the guests arrived, it would be strange if the house was not cleared of the intruder before that arrival. Jobbett would speedily convince him that to linger, presuming on relationship or old right, was nothing short of trespass and actionable at law now that he had heard how his case stood and was ordered out.

On the whole, Madam decided, this way was the better; seeing the person with whom she had to deal and the partisans he and his position might be apt to make, it was better, perhaps, than ordering his forcible ejection on her own sole authority. It must be owned she had thought of the last as she lay awake in the small hours; she even rehearsed how she would command him; and though she realised that he was not likely to obey unless it pleased him, she experienced a private satisfaction in the imagination. Possibly, had he been about when she descended in the morning, she might have been tempted to try the expedient; but he was out before she arose, so she despatched the groom to Jobbett and perceived that it was on the whole the wisest way. She ordered that when Jobbett came he should be shown into the small parlour and Zach-

ary informed that she desired to speak with him there. The last was merely a proviso, in case she had not, as she looked to have, him under her own eye if not in actual company by that time. By way of making sure of this, she sent several to discover where he had gone and to bring her word of his movements.

Zachary, in the meantime, was out with Nahum about the wood and after upon the marsh and mere. As he knew the ins and outs and lurking places of these better than any one upon the estate, excepting the old man, this was a disadvantage for Madam's underlings. Nahum, guessing it, was very well pleased; he was, also, more than well pleased with his present company and occupation. With readiness he lent himself to any ploy; with satisfaction observed the lean clean limbs of this master of his earlier manhood, approved the newer strength of arm and sinewy fingers and the old skill with which punt was driven among yellow sedges or a not forgotten way picked among the marshy courses.

"You've not forgot the way of it!" he grunted once. "He-h—He-h!" as birds rose from the water. "Teal—do you make of 'em?"

"Teal! They were gone north this while past!" Zachary laughed. He was not to be caught that way; he could name any bird as truly as the old man and number them in flight more surely. Nahum was purely satisfied.

"Aye, Master, but you've not forgot it!" he said again when, silent-footed, they approached the old decoy. "You mind the duck call perfectly, and the path o' the quag, and for steppin'—they'd not move a feather for your coming!"

"I know one who could do better than I," Zachary said, "though I misdoubt if she's so much as heard of a decoy. She can tell where a stoat has passed, catch you a hind in the spring and take an egg from under a water-hen, never stirring the bird from the nest." He watched the water-hen he himself had disturbed, plucking reeds from the marsh edges as he did so. "Growing wild, she was," he said, though more to himself than the other; "and life

caught her and sent her to town—some town, I don't know what—and caged her and, perhaps, taught her to love." He threw the reed away and, turning to Nahum, began to speak of the guest, Masterton; afterwards of other things.

Later, when it was growing towards noon, he referred again to the guests; but this time to say it was time to make a toilet for them. Together he and Nahum threaded their way to a spot where, wrapped in a cloak for protection, they had earlier bestowed the fine clothes Zachary had last night spoken of. It was a remembered hiding-place of Zachary's youth, hidden among high marsh sedges and just beyond the confines of the estate. Madam's inquirers were not likely to find it, and her jurisdiction, as mistress of Wythes Hall, did not extend to it if by any chance found. In this dressing-room Zachary donned the suit which had done duty at the Court of Prague; Nahum lending what assistance he could, which was not much, and conversing the while. The two of them conversed, knowing themselves safe; Zachary, perhaps, also knowing his time was growing brief, but not the less gay for that, passing new jests and recalling old times mirthfully till the visitors were almost overdue. Then, leaving the old garments in care of Nahum, he sauntered out—and fell in with the guests by the gate in the most accidental way in the world.

Thus it happened that when the company, riding at foot pace, arrived at the house-front, there was a fourth with them: a gentleman, as fine as the mounted two, who walked at the lady's bridle and bandied words and compliments as lightly as they. Madam, called from excited converse with the waiting Jobbett and from the last returned of her unsuccessful searchers, saw him thus; and at the sight her face for a moment flamed.

"I had the fortune to meet our guests at the gate," Zachary said pleasantly. "Lucky, since your rascals had forgot to set it wide."

Set it wide! How could she, or any, think of gates or to tell a servant to set them wide! More especially when she was sending all here and there to search for the mis-

creant who was now helping Lady Belton to dismount—while Hugh, the bumpkin, stood stupidly aside! For a moment Madam's breath and manners failed; at such times breeding is apt to help or hinder as the case may be. Fortunately, however, Clarinda stepped into the breach and gave the guests welcome till her mother's voice was under control.

So soon as might be Madam had a word for Zachary. "Jobbett is here, in the small parlour," she said in a fierce aside. "Go!"

"Here, to-day?" Zachary said with a lift of the brows—he ignored the "go." "Does that inconvenience you? Shall I bid one tell him come to-morrow? Or perhaps he has affairs of yours to occupy him through the day?"

"No!" Madam said more fiercely still, albeit of necessity low. "Go to him, he will see you now!"

Zachary met her look with twinkling eyes. "You would have the wash done here and now?" he asked. "Just as you will." He spoke sweetly and turned as if about to take the company into confidence, or at least very fully explain the reason for his temporary absence from them. But if that was his purpose, and it might quite likely have been, he did not fulfil it, for Sir James took possession of him. Madam had to submit or make a public scene, for Sir James clearly had no inclination to let him go. Truth to tell, that gentleman was relieved to find such a one here; Hugh was too loutish to at all meet his taste; Clarinda, though fair enough, was for his cousin's eyes—he himself subscribed to that plan of my lady's quite readily. It was a relief to him to find here a man who, by outward sign, he deemed to be of experience and of the world, and, by speech, promised to be far removed from the dull. Having unexpectedly found him he would not readily let him go. Madam perceived that and so submitted, as she must, inly raging and inly cursing Hugh's awkwardness—which last was unjust, seeing that he could not help that Zachary had lived longer and more than he, nor that Nature had given him but indifferent wits and his mother had hindered rather

than helped them by her method of rearing and dominant ways.

That Madam's masterful rule might not be without its disadvantages was demonstrated that day; when the mother has queened it and allowed no other right nor say, it naturally arises that hostship and mastership sit awkwardly on a leading-stringed son thrust into it. Hugh took as secondary a place as did Zachary; in fact, followed his lead where he could, leaving Madam to be host and hostess in one. Clarinda did better; too forward a manner was not becoming to her, she had but to be maidenly and mild, with a certain coyness or a flash of wit at times, such as she could easily supply; as much submission to her mother as she was minded to give was becoming, and a modest attention to Masterton not out of the way.

Zachary watched her and Masterton the while he talked or listened to Sir James and my lady. Principally he watched Masterton, noting the softening voice and lighting eyes when he deferentially bent to his fair neighbour, gracefully complimenting, courteously answering, or with deep interest heeding what she said. Zachary spoke little to him himself, having small opportunity; but he observed him attentively and missed little, either of his words to Clarinda and her mother—whom he complimented by behaviour nearly the same—or of his quite different manner to Lady Belton, at whom he seldom looked and to whom he spoke very little at all. The which was not lost on Zachary, who brought keen eyes in the service of Keren of Lowbole. His heart was heavy for Keren.

Later he spoke of Lowbole; though there was, he felt, little point in speaking, seeing that Masterton was then present. He had withdrawn himself early, leaving Sir James and the others to the wine—it may be because he preferred the society of the ladies, or deemed a show of preference more becoming; or it may be that he disliked Zachary's attentive eyes. In either case he was gone before there was an opportunity to introduce the name of

Lowbole, and from Sir James, Zachary thought, there could be nothing of interest to hear.

But as it chanced he was wrong, Sir James did say something of interest, though it did not concern Keren, or directly, Lowbole. "A wretched spot," he called that, "somewhere in a wilderness or a quag, where my fellows missed the way. There was a learned blockhead living there who gave us shelter of sorts; a conjurer, pretending to immense wisdom but unable to conjure decent food upon his table—a wretched deceiver, like all the breed."

"Dr. Ashe?" Zachary asked.

"That's the name," Sir James said, "at least, I think." And he asked without curiosity if Zachary knew the man. He hardly waited for reply, the name had started him on other topics, notably on the expedition to Reutzberg, upon which he was starting about the time of the meeting with Ashe. He began to speak of it, of incidents of the siege—all redounding to his own credit—and of the bad luck which befell him in the breaking out of the plague.

"It was like my cursed fortune!" he said. "A true trick of the jade! The place was reputed healthy. I believe it was boasted they had never had the disease there before; but when I was set down before it there it was! They must have the infection breaking out in half a dozen places at once, and all unlikely ones—wide streets, open squares, largest houses. Purely the devil's ill-luck!"

He spoke as if it were to do a personal despite to him that the inhabitants of Reutzberg had the plague; he cursed them and it freely; and when Zachary asked for particulars, gave them in an aggrieved tone.

Zachary listened with attention. He knew Reutzberg well, having attended the Schools there; the names of streets and places mentioned were familiar to him and some names of people too.

"The Burgomaster, Van Jout?" he said when Sir James spoke of him. "He lost his wife, you say? He had no wife when I was in the town."

"He had when the plague was," Sir James answered, "though he hasn't now. A young girl, I heard, young enough for a daughter and pretty enough for a mistress. They say he had an eye for a pretty wench, the one sound thing I heard alleged about him." He poured himself more wine as he spoke, clearly not concerned with the sorrows of the burgomaster.

Zachary nodded. "That's so," he said; "but he was a hard man, none the less, and something cunning. His brother, Jacob, was better in grain; though I don't know that I would not as soon have had to do with the other. Jacob was fanatical, a good man after his kind but narrow and not to be turned, no matter how black the business, once he'd got a crooked idea of righteousness into his head. The Burgomaster knew how to give him the idea when he wanted his help to get some doubtful matter through; at least, I've always thought so."

He spoke reminiscently, but Sir James gave him little attention. "Did you know 'em?" he asked without interest. "Dull company, I should think, a couple of sots. One of 'em's hanged himself; both of 'em were near out of such minds as they had, I heard—the one for his wife, he doted on her as an old fool will, the other for his son, he, too, died of the plague."

"Did Jacob Van Jout lose his son?" Zachary asked. "He would take that to heart; he thought the world of him!"

Sir James did not answer, the affairs of the Van Jouts did not concern him; he began to discourse on acts of his own prowess in love and war.

To which Hugh listened with admiration, but Zachary, it is to be feared, not at all. In his mind he was seeing a little old town, the houses dark coloured and many gabled. He was seeing a wide square where, on one side, lived the Burgomaster Van Jout (who had lost his doted-upon girl wife), and, on the other, his brother Jacob (whose only son was dead). He was seeing it, and seeing, in his mind, something which, on a day years ago, had been in the centre

between. And dimly through the vision, as a face seen in smoke, one took shape; upon his mind stole the picture of Ashe—Ashe as he had seen him times and again at Low-bole, ivory face, cold eyes, and hands so fine, so strong, so sure, making and breaking without haste and without ruth. Inadvertently he shivered.

"Schleger?" he asked suddenly, as the thought of that ornament of the Schools of Reutzberg occurred to him. "What has become of him? The learned Gustav Schleger?"

Sir James had never heard of such a one. "If he was of the learned," he said, "he'd no doubt left the town; they all did before ever the soldiers came. Such cattle usually have the wit to save their own skins, though they and their conjurations are no good for any other."

Zachary nodded, then remarked: "You would seem contemptuous of the learned; I take it you have found them disappointing? Dr. Ashe or another, perhaps, has made you bigger promises than he was able to fulfil?"

Sir James denied that. "I don't go to 'em for help," said he. "I'd pack the lot to gaol for cheats sooner than spend a penny on any nostrum or advice from a starveling philosopher who can't so much as help himself to a new coat or a bottle of wine!"

Again Zachary nodded; it sounded true enough; none the less he knew there are men who will lie you before and behind and all around freely, and yet hold themselves dishonoured if they break their pledged word to tell or not tell of a matter of no moment to them. Also, that men of no faith are not the last to consult the oracle or buy specifics from the witch. And yet—

How should a man, quiet and at home in a lost spot in England, give death to a town across the sea? How should he send by the hand of one who does not know the means and the measure of it? How reach where all is straightly shut up and no one from without enters? The thing were impossible on the face of it.

"Yet I am fain to know what became of the third phial marked *Ultio*; still more what it is within them."

So thought Zachary as, the story of Sir James' last amour having come to an end, the three of them rose to seek the ladies.

They found the ladies in the withdrawing-room and Masterton with them, acquitting himself with that distinction which was his. Zachary observed him with admiration, not forgetting to play a becoming part himself the while. Later, Lady Belton, seeing the direction of his eyes, spoke to him of Masterton and Clarinda, then together. She praised them as a pretty pair, or well-matched in height, or some such, coupling words as women use when their minds tend towards match-making—and there are few women who, no matter what their own experience, do not have their minds some time tending that way.

Zachary shrugged a little at her words. "Are they well matched?" he asked.

"In height," she said, "in height I said, sir."

"Ah?" he agreed and "Oh, yes." Then: "I hardly think they will be matched in anything else—and I do not know that I would think the better of him if they were."

She looked surprised. "Sir?" she queried.

"I mean no despite to Mistress Clarinda," he assured her, "nor yet to your cousin when I say that I would not wish her, or any, such a matching."

"But—" she began in puzzle and perhaps a little gentle huff too.

Here, however, Sir James intervened. "My lady," he said, coming over to them with an ill-suppressed yawn, "do you note the hour?"

She rose at once and set about making adieux.

Consequently she had no further word with Zachary except a few as he mounted her.

"Do I understand," said she then, speaking low, "that a match between Mistress Clarinda and my kinsman—

should such ever be proposed—would not have your approval?"

"My approval," he answered, "matters nothing at all: it was not as a member of the family, with a voice in the disposal of the lady, that I spoke."

"What then?"

He looked beyond her towards the mere. "As one who is likely to be going away to be no more seen," he said; "such may speak the truth."

"What is the truth?" she queried.

He did not answer for a moment, then: "I hold that a man should ever follow the light which is in him," he said. "He may not attain to the glory he has seen from afar, often he is better not attaining to it; but he should walk in the light which has shined into him and not obscure it by taking any artificial candle. He—or she—who sells such birthright for a mess of pottage dishonours himself and the pottage, which, if it were the sorriest stuff on earth, were worthy a better stomach than such could give it."

"I do not take you—" the lady said puzzled.

"What are you two whispering about?" Sir James cried. "I sooth, you'll have me jealous!" he jested to Zachary; "though not so jealous as not to pray you to visit me. Take pity upon me at your earliest, dear lad. I find your Colchester most plaguy dull, a very grave for wits."

Zachary promised he would do as desired as soon as might be; adding, with a twinkling eye on Madam, that it might not be so very soon.

After that the guests departed.

The sound of their horses' hoofs had not died away, they themselves were no more than out of sight round the bend of the drive, when Madam's long-pent feelings broke out. "Interloper! Cheat! Knave! Sneak-credit!" were but a few of the epithets she heaped upon Zachary and the charges which, with amplifications, she brought against him.

He acquiesced soothingly.

"I perfectly understand," he said, when she paused for breath.

And when, after further expressing of her wrath, she paused again for the same purpose, he inquired: "You feel free to deal with the matter now? Or perhaps you would rather rest awhile? A glass of wine? I can see Jobbett while you drink it, if he is yet here. He is? Most excellent man! I'll go to him."

Madam stopped him. "Wait!" she commanded. "You'll not go alone! You, a sneak, an abuser of generosity and hospitality, you are not to be trusted alone!" and, her feelings getting beyond her, she once more gave them rein.

Zachary listened with patience. "Quite natural," he said at the end. "But, dear Madam, believe me, it were better if Jobbett were seen, more especially as he would appear to be waiting for it. Him seen and the situation once cleared, everything falls into order; all the offences of the day, Sir James' invitation, my presence here, everything, becomes either the proper state of affairs or an impertinence demanding instant departure. All will be quite simple, you see; so, with your permission, I will go," and he went.

Madam came after him. "You'll not be closeted alone with Jobbett!" she said. "I'll have no plotting against me!"

Zachary raised his brows. "So insecure as that?" he said sympathetically.

She lifted her fan; but thought better of it and did not strike. "I would not trust you with any," she retorted, "not even my own son, the fool!"

"Poor lad!" Zachary said. "Do not be too hard on him. He is not really to blame for not having been to Prague or the Low Countries or highways and bye-ways interesting to Sir James; nor yet for not having conversed with Grand Dukes or tinkers or, indeed, many but your gentle self and the worthies (and their grooms) of your providing."

He opened the small parlour door. "Ah, Jobbett!" he said, as the little man rose nervously. "It's many years since we met, and I dare swear you haven't been half so impatient for me in any of them as in these last few hours, when Madam's company kept us. But it's always the last turn that does it, and the last inch that's longest. Speaking of inches, how is Mistress Jobbett?—as grandly tall as ever, of course, and still more fair?"

Mistress Jobbett was a woman of great height and considerable beauty, condemned by some as giving herself an air, but the pride of her husband's life. He smiled proudly a moment now, but quickly repressed the sign of pleasure and stood uneasily shifting under Madam's eye, as far as he could get from Zachary.

"I'm afraid you're not pleased to see me now I have come," Zachary said. "I should have thought you would have been, seeing how long you've waited. Have you been so well entertained? Work, I trust, Jobbett, nothing else—there is a pretty wench in the house!"

"Now, Mr. Zachary!" Jobbett began, and then caught Madam's eye. "I regret, sir," said he, straightening up, "I regret to have to say, sir, you have no business here; were it otherwise, of course, I should be pleased—I mean—the situation is to be deplored, sir, but—but you are not your father's heir. You perceive—"

"Madam does," Zachary said, placing a chair for the lady and taking one himself. "The next thing is for me to perceive it, or for her to perceive something different. Come, man, sit down, we are about to have a chat, a pleasant chat *à trois*, likely to be long."

But it was not very long, for, after all, there was not much to be said and nothing new to be advanced. Jobbett bore out what Madam had declared last night. There was the early will, made when Zachary left home, and drawn up under instructions by Jobbett, who, besides man of affairs, was attorney for the old Squire and factotum in general and ordinary. Of the late will, made in the winter, the little man had heard, though he had not himself seen it since

it was drawn in London by a lawyer there; and there afterwards destroyed. Of the time and manner of the destruction there was no evidence beyond Madam's bare word; but that it was destroyed there was room for no reasonable doubt. There had been a thorough overhauling of the Squire's papers, both here and in town; this by competent and disinterested persons. Jobbett was ready to take oath, and the lawyer in London, he said, would take oath, that there was no other will, neither in their possession nor anywhere else at all.

At that Zachary nodded; there was no need for oath, he said, he could believe them without. Indeed, he could have found it so easy to believe that his father, induced by Madam, had destroyed the second will, that all these precautions were somewhat superfluous.

"I took no risks," Madam said shortly. "I knew the creature with whom I should have to deal."

"I wonder if you did?" he speculated.

Madam's eye flashed, but Jobbett said pacifically: "You perceive, sir, how matters stand."

"That there is none but the early will," Zachary said; "is that it? None but that, the other being destroyed by some one or ones before either could come into force?"

"Do you dare charge me with its destruction?" Madam demanded.

"Madam," he replied, "I cannot see it likely that you would ever have come to those straits; your husband was always submissive to your will. Yet, I own—"

He paused and considered her thoughtfully, and she raged. "Go on!" she cried, "Go on!"

Jobbett looked from one to the other and plucked his quill. "Sir!" he protested in a small voice. "You see, there is but the earlier will—"

"Right, Jobbett," Zachary said cheerily. "Right to stick to the point, man. There is but the early will; that's all that matters now—on what isn't we can't act; and by the early one—"

"You have no more right here," Madam said, "than any chance vagabond who knocked at the door!"

With which pronouncement there was no room to disagree. And when matters had got so far and the fact was fairly admitted, Madam rose and announced there was nothing further to be said.

Jobbett cleared his throat; if the truth were known he detested Madam and was much afraid of her, too, but of course could not afford to quarrel with her. She, at present, could not afford to quarrel with him, though he was not aware of the fact; he knew all the ins and outs of affairs, long left neglected in his hands, and, until she had them in hers and understood them too, she must employ him. He cleared his throat. "Mr. Zachary is the eldest son, Madam," he ventured—one could see the light in the buttons on his sleeve-cuff twinkle from the trembling of his hand as he said it. "It would seem, from what your ladyship says, that the Squire intended—thought—to make some sort of bequest to him—"

He hesitated, then stopped, avoiding her eye.

"Continue," she said caustically. "What next?"

Jobbett tried, but halted, and Zachary intervened. "Now, Jobbett!" he reproved. "After all these years, too! You surprise me!"

"What do you mean?" Madam demanded.

"That our good friend here should have known us better than to think that you have anything you want to give or anything I want to take."

She laughed contemptuously. "Jobbett, you're a fool!" she said. "And you—" her eyes hardened as he turned them on Zachary.

"I'm a fool too," he assured her blandly. "I understand you have always held that, though perhaps not been so sure of it till to-day, except, of course, when I was shown the door before. The pity is the foolish things of this world so often confound the wise."

She drew in her breath sharply. "Do you threaten me!"

she cried, her face flushing—to the last he had the faculty to rouse her as no other.

But in a moment she had recovered. "You cannot confound me," she said, "nor ever will; I know what your threats are worth and pay no attention to them." She half turned her back. "You can go," she said, "now, at once, the sooner the better; your presence here is an impertinence; a trespass, now you know the position. Go, and do not ever attempt to come again!"

He bowed. "With all my heart," he said. "Charmed to have seen you this once again, to have renewed old impressions—so very clear and true."

She stamped. "Go!"

"I do," he said, "and, incidentally, take with me the thing best worth having."

"What?"

She stayed him sharply. "What is this? What do you take? Don't think you'll carry anything off in your pockets; I'll have you searched first!"

"By all means," he acquiesced. "No, it's not there," touching a pocket, "nor there; no, nor there. Truth to tell, I brought it with me when I came, and I hope to have it with me when I die, even if that be as naked as I was born."

She eyed him angrily. "Nonsense!" she said. "Folly, as ever!" She half turned, but still hesitated to let him go.

"Do you know the talk of the waterfowl at spring twilight?" he asked Jobbett as he waited. "No? Nor the smell of poplar buds in March?"

"Nonsense!" Madam muttered again. "It's all nonsense, I believe!"

"Just so," he said, as if she had agreed with him. "That's it, that's what I say, you have not got what is best worth having here. Shall I go? You have nothing further to say? Well, farewell, then. Do not press too hard on step-brother Jacob, 'tis a well-meaning lad. *Adieu!*"

Madam slammed the door.

CHAPTER XI

OF THE GOING OF TOBIAH, THE DISSENTER, FROM COLCHESTER

ON a Sunday in March Tobiah opened the word of the Lord in the meeting-room which is near the house of Jonathan Bales the shoemaker. The texts of his discourse were (Luke xxi, 8, 9): "*Take heed that ye be not deceived: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; go ye not therefore after them. And when ye shall hear of wars and commotions, be not terrified . . . the end is not yet.*" With some consideration of that which was spoken to the prophet Daniel—"Shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased. . . . But go thou thy way . . . for thou shalt rest and stand in thy lot at the end of thy days." This selected by reason of the fanatical preacher, Samuel Calderbeck, who was once more in town, speaking of damnation and wrath and the near approach of the end of all things; and of the actual presence of the Devil in town.—Not in the ill-doings of the townsmen, their cheating upon the weights, their lying and evil speaking and sabbath breaking; but in a separate form, nigh as corporate, one might suppose, as a bear brought there at fair time and escaped its keepers. Which was a doctrine finding no favour with Tobiah; no more than did the assemblages, attended by many such weighty people as Simon Shipp and his sister Rachel, where professors, led by Calderbeck, groaned and prayed in concert, seeking to drive this devil out as one might drive a swarm of bees, or as if the Prince of Darkness were a trifle to be conjured by a form of words. Tobiah, who had but a poor opinion of such do-

ings, spoke upon the subject that Sabbath, dealing straightly with the people. At the end, and when he had come to a fitting conclusion, he called upon the brethren to join him in prayer that they might be delivered from the Devil within themselves and within the congregation of the Lord; also that they might with righteousness work good to one another, but otherwise mind their own affairs.

The whole company fell on their knees and (we will hope) lifted up their hearts—all of them, that is, with the exception of one. This one Tobiah himself did not discover, being strongly occupied in prayer: but others did—whether to their credit or discredit at such time I do not say; though, one must admit, it may be for the health of the wrongdoer to be discovered and reported upon. Report of this one was made to Tobiah when the meeting had broken up. Keren-happuch Ashe, the maid who had for six months abode in the house of Simon Shipp, had not knelt when others did, but remained sitting upright upon the bench; not sleeping nor swooning, clearly awake and well, looking straight before her. She had sat thus until her neighbour, little Mistress Betty, roused to it by Mistress Rachel Shipp, herself beyond reach of the culprit, had pulled her gown. Then, but not till then, she seemed to remember herself and where she was, and knelt, covering her face decently, though without signs of confusion.

Now, this doing showed either a daring outfacing of Tobiah and disagreement with the words he spoke, or else a naughty inattention at the time of preaching and prayer. The first was unlikely, although the girl was of the household now presided over by Mistress Rachel Shipp, an incliner to Calderbeck; she was too young for such opinions and temerity. But she was not too young for the wandering mind, it is a sin youth is prone to, though seldom exhibiting it so brazenly and with such open despite of the service of the Lord. Tobiah, when he heard of it, perceived that he was called to speak with her on the subject: the more so that Mistress Betsy Shipp, of whose sound sense he had some opinion, had now been a while removed from the

over-seeing of the maid. Accordingly, on the afternoon of that Sabbath, he betook himself to the vintner's house and demanded to see the girl.

Rachel, to whom the request was made, bemoaned the naughtiness of the wrongdoer to him; also, and notably, the fact that the deed had been so public. "Such a public slighting of the Word and by one of this household!" she lamented. "A godly household, a God-fearing household, one ever known—through the mercy of God, no credit to sinful flesh—for seemly behaviour!"

"Hum!" said Tobiah.

"My sister Shipp is lax," the spinster went on, "a good meaning woman, the best in intentions, but lax with her young people. Yes, brother," this to Simon, "I must say it, you know it too; she has not been strict with them, and this one, a brand, I fear, hardly to be snatched from the burning—"

"I would speak with her," said Tobiah. "Bid her hither, Mistress."

Rachel rose. "We have shut her within the garret," she said, "there to meditate upon her misdoing, having first wrought with her upon it. My brother and I have done our poor best under the Lord to bring her to a conviction of sin; I hope, sir, that you will not find the ground wholly unprepared for such godly admonition as you may give."

"Um!" said Tobiah.

Rachel departed on the errand, leaving the Dissenter with Simon, a different man from the one he was in his wife's wholesome company. A gloomy and sour-visaged man with ill-favouring, fear-full eyes and restless hands. He conversed with Tobiah, quoting much from the Apocalypse, fidgeting the while with what was on the mantelshef—the foreign shell some early sailor lover had given his mother, the thunderbolt found by his grandfather in a chalk-pit in the south country. He dropped the last in his movings and removings and took it up again with haste and a little anxiety; it was a relic by which he set some store, for his grandfather's conversion dated from the finding of it, on a

night, one of heavy storm, which he spent in the chalk-pit, too drunk to go further.

He spoke of the conversion to Tobiah; he had often spoken before. Also he spoke of the wicked times in which they lived, the temptations and trials that beset many and the evil which he saw loosed upon the earth.

"*'Unless the Lord shorten the time,'*" he began to say.

"If He do," Tobiah observed, "it were a poor business for some, and they not all of those called ungodly. There are professors I wot of, who need time to prepare their robes of righteousness, and were better spending it and their tears in washing the same than in weeping for ills in which they have small concern and less certain knowledge, seeing they were not invited to the council of the Most High. Ah, here is the maid."

Here she was, accompanying Rachel and in no very apparent distress, either at her misdeed or its punishment, making her curtesy to Tobiah with proper respect.

"So," said he, regarding her severely, "I hear that to-day you did not heed the voice of prayer, and were publicly disregarding of the invitation to approach the Ear."

She admitted it; she could not do otherwise, nor, it must be owned, did she show any great signs of wishing to do so.

Tobiah rebuked her fittingly and with good words; and she listened both to his reprimand and to the words; this without saying anything. Which, indeed, was as it should be, though he, remembering what the wayfarer Zachary had said of her, rather expected otherwise.

"How," he asked at length, "how came it that you did this? That you ventured to disregard the invitation to prayer?"

"I thought on another matter," she said. "I did not hear."

Rachel exclaimed at such unabashedness.

But the girl did not notice, she had remembered that it was Tobiah who had been speaking when she had thought of another matter. "I fear it was discourteous," she said. "I ask your pardon, sir."

"Nay!" cried Tobiah. "It is not my pardon you should ask, nor to me the despite is done! It is the Lord."

"Oh, that!" she said, and she smiled a little, a sudden come and gone smile, as the momentary shining of the sun through trees. "He will have understood," she said simply, when they looked their surprise.

Rachel and Simon cried out upon such temerity and naughty pride. But Tobiah perceived there might also be here a faith out of the ordinary, one that truly held (what all profess) that the Lord was all-seeing and a just judge before whom, in good consciences, there was small room for fear.

"What is this whereon you thought and for which you think the Lord may hold you excused?" he demanded.

She hesitated, then: "How and if I could do ought to prevent one from temptation," she said.

"What!" Rachel cried indignantly. "Burdened thus with sins and yet venturing to intermeddle and think upon those of others! Oh, obdurate and proud of heart!"

But Tobiah said: "I would hear of this matter; declare it."

Again Keren hesitated, whereupon Rachel admonished her: "Answer good Master Tobiah," she said. "Do not stand sulking thus or preparing words; speak, and speak truly; make no lying tale!"

"If I speak truly," Keren answered, it is to be feared, with small respect. Then she turned to Tobiah. "I would fain have counsel on this matter," she said doubtfully, "yet—" she glanced from Simon Shipp to his sister.

Now, as we know, Tobiah had but a poor opinion of the vintner, still less of his sister; he shared anything that Keren might hold anent the unwisdom of calling them to council, more especially if the subject touched the shortcomings of others.

"This would seem to be in sorts a ghostly matter," he said, "the which as a rule are but darkened with words if many come to the rehearsing of them. I will speak with this young woman alone. Should I hear from her anything to concern you, your family or the welfare of those in

this house, I will convey it to you after. For the rest, it would appear to be for my resolving, not yours." And he had them from the room.

Which was as well, did he desire to hear, for Keren would not have spoken with them present, though that he did not know.

"Proceed," said he, when they were gone.

And Keren, having moved far from the door, spoke. "There is one," she began, "who is unhappily wedded, but who, though her husband is wholly unworthy, yet loves him. There is another that loves her; one who, though he has no right in that, yet is no ill man, but an honourable and goodly otherwise, I think."

"Hoighty-toighty!" cried Tobiah. "A goodly man that casts eyes upon another's wife! You know not what you're saying, Mistress, I think."

"Nay, I know," Keren answered. "At one time I did not: at one time I mistook him on the one side and at another on the other; but now I know."

—That knowing, the passionless justice of cool and complete sight! The judgment there is no appeal from, before which love and hate alike lay dead!—

But Tobiah only saw here a maid (in a God-fearing household) who spoke calmly of mortal sin and seemed to half defend the iniquitous inclination.

"A pretty thing!" quoth he. "A comely maid's judgment! 'A wife who loves her husband undeserved,' for sooth! Pray what have deserts to do with it? An honourable man with adulterous thoughts!"

Keren nodded. "That is it," she said. "I think, even, that he likely has persuaded himself those thoughts, too, are honourable and that in loving and, if he can, winning her, he obeys an higher law."

"Then it is time he were unpersuaded!" Tobiah cried; "and you, too! Are you persuaded, pray? Or do you but split sins and measure words in talk as some split straws? Know that sin is sin and as such to be condemned; there is no need to weigh words over it!"

"It is not on condemnation I thought," she said; "it is on help—if there be any."

"H'm!" said Tobiah, and stopped. "Nevertheless there should be condemnation," he said. "Proceed."

She obeyed him. "Matters were as I have said last year," she told him; "since then, I hear, the lady has had fresh trouble: lost the babe on which she had set her heart and had fresh occasion to mourn her husband's fickleness. And the other—I do not know how things fell out with him nor how much he has been with her in the time between, but he is with her now and has been a while. In all sorts he presents a contrast to the husband; he is the finer man, the better and the wiser. He is gentle and attentive, he is kind and thoughtful, he fits her mood and enters into her cares; in truth and good earnest, it is no part played by a gallant to gain his end; he is veritably the man he seems." One more versed in the ways of women might have fancied she spoke from some personal trial which had weighed and found wanting; but the good man Tobiah was not an expert in such matters.

"I have heard a good deal," she went on, "for I have inquired—of seamstresses and such folk, who see the inside of houses and who, when questioned with discretion, tell more than they themselves are aware. I have also seen somewhat, for I have observed when the chance offered, though I have not myself been seen—always, these two were too occupied, the one with the other, to see. As yet I do not think she loves him; certainly I do not think she knows on what edge she stands. Did she, I am sure she would feel both fear and horror; a year ago I saw her much, so that of her I know—"

"In that case," Tobiah interrupted, "and if it is true she is so far sensible of righteousness as to be liable to feel thus much as she ought, it is time she did know. It is time she were woke to knowledge of what deadly sin she plays with and in what danger stands."

But Keren was not sure. "When one cries to one who stands, unaware, upon the edge of a pit, there is ever a

chance they start and fall in; as much chance, I think, as that they start and fall back.

"This," she explained, "the warning or not warning, was that whereon I thought this morning during the preaching and on into the beginning of prayer. And the more I think, the more I misdoubt to do it; fearing that, by words, body may be given to what may be in vapour in her mind; fearing, knowing rather, that I cannot do it, cannot in any way enter upon the matter with her, without startling her with the great start I spoke of."

"H'm!" said Tobiah thoughtfully, and sat a moment.

"Have you spoke with her much of late?" he asked after a little.

"Not at all since her coming into the town," Keren answered; "indeed, I do not think she so much as knows that I am here; likely has even forgotten my name."

Tobiah nodded; he began to see that, as the girl had said, it might be unsuitable she should speak, even had the matter not been, as it was, not one for the meddling of a maid. Clearly it was he who was called upon; he said so.

"You?" Keren said in surprise. "But, sir, you do not know them!"

"What of that? The Lord sends to whom He will and by whom He will. His messenger does not wait for some master of ceremonies or Jack-in-office to present him. The word is given and he goes, as Elijah to King Ahab, with no puling under gourds or in whales' bellies, as the weakling Jonah before the journey to Nineveh. The word is given to me to warn and to contend of sin and of righteousness with these. I go. Not to the woman—maybe you are right concerning her. I grant you, there are cattle it were sometimes well to approach warily. I do not begin with her; I begin with the man."

Keren sat a moment, seeing as in a picture the good man Tobiah and Masterton. Her eyes glinted a little—then: "Perhaps," she said almost to herself, "it were as well—I don't know. At least it can do no harm." She turned to Tobiah. "I have done what I could—not now, a good while

ago. I did, to prevent them if I might, what was not easy to do, what seemed to me a great and a somewhat hard thing: it was no good." (Mistress Keren, how can you tell that? How can you tell that the deed in the stone room, which was hard to you, was no good? Have you entered into the beginnings and ends of things to say that sacrifice is wasted which does not buy the boon sought when the dew of it falls upon the sacrificer's heart? The ways of God are greater than our eyes and stretch beyond our thoughts and farther than the morning star.)

When Tobiah left the vintner's house—and the vintner and his sister in ignorance of the subject-matter of the talk with Keren—he carried with him the name of Masterton and the place of his lodging in the town. He had given some sort of undertaking not to speak with Lady Belton, Keren had requested that; and, though he was no man to make terms and conditions, especially upon such a subject and with a maid who should be docile and meek, he had given it. He would not have had Masterton's name otherwise; also, and this was more to the point, for the other he did not know and no one yet had driven Tobiah, Keren put it skilfully—she had an uncommon insight into the workings of some minds and no scruple at times in using the knowledge to deal with them.

Anyhow, Tobiah had Masterton's name and the name of his lodging.

The next day, behold him seeking admission, and speedily obtaining it.

Straight into Masterton's presence he stalked.

"Sir," said he, standing before him, "I have a message for you."

"For me?" Masterton said—he received him with gracious courtesy. "I am honoured that one of your reverend calling should deliver it in person. Pray be seated, sir. From whom is this message?"

"From the Lord," said Tobiah. "It concerns a woman in this town, grievously beset of a devil."

Masterton raised his brows a trifle. "Ah!" he said.

He imagined Tobiah one of the fanatics who the unregenerate, and sometimes the regenerate, held to be a little touched in the head. "This sounds a sad case," said he, with his affable politeness. "May I inquire how I come to be concerned?"

"*'Thou art the man,'*" Tobiah made answer.

Masterton lifted his brows again. "Indeed!" he said, still humouring him.

Tobiah nodded. He had not sat, he stood tall and straight. "I will give you the words of the Lord on the matter," he said. "It is written '*Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.*' '*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*' '*Whosoever looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath already committed adultery with her.*'"

"What?"

Masterton had sprung to his feet; for the moment he forgot himself, forgot his condescending tolerance. "You say that to me!" he said, breathing short. "You—"

"The word of the Lord works," Tobiah observed approvingly. "Hear further what the Lord has to say."

But Masterton would not hear further; he had regained control of himself, at least sufficiently to truly regret that he had been betrayed into this sudden display of emotion and anger by the words of an ignorant fanatic—one, he deemed, who had no reason but chance for the choice of himself as listener to the words spoken.

"I cannot hear further what you or the Lord have to say," he said haughtily, "my time is occupied; if you have no other business with me than preaching, I must request that you go."

Tobiah did not move. "She who is a participator in sin," he said, "is also a participator in damnation. One, who by temptation, seduction or infection gets a soul to Hell, heats the fires of his own perdition with the burning of the formerly loved object of his desire."

Masterton went to the door and called his servants. "Put this mad fellow into the street," he said.

Tobiah measured the men with his eye, and there is

little doubt but what he could have given some account of himself with the two of them, for he was a mighty man and handy. Howbeit he did not choose now. "There is no need," he said to them kindly, "my message is delivered." He turned to Masterton, "I will see you again," said he.

He withdrew to the doorway, then looked back. "There are," said he, "ever those who boast themselves that their love is stronger than death and hell, and who, knowing nothing about it, vow perdition were a small price to pay for it, and its satisfaction, forgetting that the paramour also pays the same price, with her will or without it. If you hold this silly vanity, think upon that before you drag yourself and another to Hell-fire."

Masterton made a movement of peremptory dismissal and one of the varlets seized the Dissenter by the coat; and when he did not instantly move, struck him roughly.

Tobiah turned his other side to him (as commanded by the Gospel). Whereupon the knave, grinning, struck that harder. Which done, Tobiah smote him upon the jaw with the right hand, and his fellow, who sprang forward, similarly with the left. Afterwards he walked downstairs and into the street.

The fellows started after him, but they were called back by their master; Tobiah, pausing for them, heard him say: "Let him go! Let him go! He is mad."

Perforce they obeyed. And Tobiah, seeing it, went on his way, guessing that it was less because of tenderness for his wits than because of a disinclination for a brawl in the street and the continuance there of the talk begun in private.

But if Masterton thought the matter was to be ended by thus with contempt dismissing it and Tobiah as mad and trivial, he erred, not knowing his man. On the next day, as he returned from riding with Lady Belton, he fell in with the Dissenter. Or, rather, as he left his cousin's house after parting with the lady, Tobiah stopped him, putting a hand, not a small one, on the horse's bridle.

"It is written in the Book of Wisdom," he said, "'*Sit not at all with another man's wife!*'"

"Let go!" Masterton cried, blackly angry and making the horse rear.

Tobiah did not leave go, he kept his hold and raised his voice: "'*Sit not down with her in thine arms, and spend not thy money with her at the wine; lest—*'" the horse plunged again here and started forward—"'*Lest,*'" Tobiah shouted, trotting beside, "'*thy heart incline unto her, and so through thy desire thou shalt fall into destruction.*'"

Masterton raised his whip and with the butt struck heavily. Tobiah loosed his grip; he could not do otherwise, for the moment his hand was numbed by the blow. But it did not greatly matter to him, he had spoken.

The next day, as Masterton came forth from a shop, Tobiah came behind him and tapped him on the shoulder: "Thus saith the Lord," said he, "'*I will hedge up thy way with thorns and make a wall that she shall not find the path. Thou shalt follow after thy lover, but shalt not overtake—*'"

Masterton flung round. "This is enough!" he said, with the quiet of great anger. "I have borne all I will bear, my patience—"

"The Lord's patience," Tobiah said, "is long, but in the end it is worn out—the end is the '*Lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, where adulterers and whoremongers have their part.*'"

But Masterton's patience was truly gone; also he was terribly angry. This fanatical molestation was an insult and an outrage which his proud blood could not brook; and if there were sanity of sorts behind its persistence, then it was worse and with still more reason to be ended.

"If you do not stay your tongue," he threatened Tobiah, "I will take steps to have it stopped for you."

"So said Herod," Tobiah observed, "or words to that effect, when John Baptist reproved him for his brother Philip's wife. Not, however, that the case is truly identical; I am not a saint, the lady will not ask my head in a

charger, the adultery is not yet committed, and you are not of so close kin to the husband—”

Masterton turned on Tobiah with a ferocity which had in it perhaps something of fear as well as shock. “What’s this?” he said. But at that moment Sir James and another came upon them.

“Why, Masterton!” the other cried, clapping him upon the shoulder. “Hast turned preacher, or is it listener, at the street ends? Let’s hear the good words, lad!”

Masterton’s face relaxed, his ordinary light ease slipped on as a mask, but infinitely more quickly. “There is no sermon,” he said carelessly, “or if there was it is finished,”—his eyes met Tobiah’s for a second—“and it will not be begun again.” Linking his arm with his cousin’s, he turned away without another glance at the Dissenter.

Which was a proceeding needing some doing and some pride and courage in the doing, for Tobiah’s last words seemed to show that he might perhaps have named names more than inconvenient for Sir James to hear. But Masterton had pride and courage too, and haughtily and successfully played the part. Thus he left Tobiah; although from choice there is no doubt he would, had his cousin not inopportunely come, have rather concluded with the Dissenter then and once for all.

One cannot altogether blame Masterton for what he afterwards did. He had borne with Tobiah, treating him with contempt and, what he himself deemed, leniency; and Tobiah abated nothing for it. He then warned him and threatened to have him stopped; and still Tobiah abated nothing. How should he, seeing he had the word of the Lord? But the word of the Lord, as delivered by Tobiah, was ill-hearing for one like Masterton, who held, as Keren had perceived, high thoughts of his love and of the honour and purity of himself and his mistress, no matter what they did or might do. (Strong lovers have achieved to the holding of this creed before and will again, no matter how events may have turned another light on those who held before them.) But to such the crude words “adultery”

and "paramour" and the plain dealing of Scripture have a jarring and a shocking sound. And to such, when they are of the pride and sensibility of Masterton, the uncouth tearing out and exhibiting of their most private sentiments, which they believe known to none, is an outrage not to be endured.

Seeing this, one can understand how it was that, when Tobiah paid no attention to the warning or the command to silence, Masterton took the steps he threatened. It was easy: in these days the Conventicle Act and the Five Mile Act were upon the Statute Books; if not everywhere and always enforced. Masterton was hand in glove with all in authority in the town, and there were among them, as there always are, some by no means well disposed towards Dissenters. Nothing was simpler than to stir them to enforce the acts against Tobiah for a half-dozen specified good reasons—the molestation by the message of the Lord not mentioned among them. Tobiah preached openly every Sunday and often upon lecture days in the week; and, whatever warning he had, he would continue to do the same, like the prophet Daniel before the incident of the lions' den. There was no question about his transgression of these laws, nor yet about catching him; and when caught—to gaol.

It will be perceived that Masterton could have had Tobiah in gaol with perfect legality and no trouble. But he was hardly inclined to proceed to such extremity unless compelled. For one reason, although deep in love and quite determined to protect himself and his love from outrage, he was an humane and moderately just man. For another, he was no fool, and did not fail to perceive that Tobiah, who would likely be moved to deliver particulars of his message when brought before magistrates, might be an awkward person so placed. Therefore, though he arranged for and compassed the Dissenter's apprehension—without any apparent part therein—he did not intend to have him committed, could that be avoided.

Tobiah was taken on a Thursday, on the road between Peldon and Colchester, as he was returning from Tolles-

hurst, where he had that afternoon opened the word of the Lord to a company of professors who were in the habit of assembling in a house there twice a month. He could have been taken in Colchester any day as easily, but he was not: he was taken upon the road, as I say, a good way from Colchester, late in the afternoon of a showery day of April. Perceive now two things—One: not being taken in the act (although he would certainly not deny his preaching, or his identity), it should be possible, were it desirable, to get him off on a juggle; or, rather, arrange that he never came to trial at all—Power could do that easily. Two: the spot was far from Colchester, the road long, poor and winding, the day advanced and the weather bad; in humanity to the prisoner (although he did not regard the elements one whit), those that took him need not proceed all the way to the town that night. Darkness beginning to fall and rain coming on, they stayed for the night at a house on the road—Wythes Hall, where young Squire Ward, who had, or whose mother had for him, some thoughts of eventually aspiring to the position of Justice, would have the prisoner in safe keeping. And to Wythes Hall it were easy for one, Masterton, to ride, there see the prisoner and converse with him, letting him understand that a promise of discretion and abstinence from meddling in affairs of persons above him would help to liberty; but a persistence in free speech would entail a loss of all opportunity to utter the same. The weight of which threat would be the greater for that he would be in durance when he heard it, and could plainly perceive he would go to other and worse did he not regard it.

Now this was well planned; and carried out as planned. But there was one mistake, the mistake to which the clever are prone, that of overdoing. I have known the most able man and brilliant liar fail for that, for having trimmed a central lie, one as sound as time and strong enough to stand while life lasted—with a fancy ornament of unneeded evidence, weak at one joint. Masterton would not ride forth to Wythes Hall on the Thursday when Tobiah was taken; it

went against his pride to hasten to the Dissenter, also it spoiled the air of casualness which otherwise was about the whole. He was something of an artiste in diplomacy, and liked all well done. There was, besides, a solid reason for not going; a night under lock at Wythes Hall should be an aid to reflection and help Tobiah to perceive how matters stood and to take an advisable view. Which was very good reasoning. But there are some who hold that the Worthy Man was not a subject for reason, or a reasonable subject.

Be that as it may: on this Thursday, things having so far befallen as Masterton planned, behold Tobiah led into Wythes Hall about dusk, the rain streaming from his coat, his hat brim and his long nose; and those with him in little better plight. A group of servants, having news of his approach, were gathered about the back entrance to see him come; they jeered at him, as such small fry will, knowing themselves safe under their master's or mistress' countenance.

Tobiah reproved them with a severe word; though principally for the condition of the back premises, which were but slatternly kept.

He was led below stairs, to a strong room which was through an inner cellar; a place dry and clean and smelling not unpleasantly of malt, which was wont to be stored there, though all gone now and the room empty. Here he was locked in, with no light and nothing but a box whereon to sit. In a short while, however, there came a bump against the door, as of one carrying something; and, after a fumbling with the key, Nahum came in with a bit of candle in a lantern and a bundle of straw.

He grunted as he entered, kicking the door to with his foot, and carefully locking it before he set about placing the straw. He, as we know, was one of the unregenerate, and by no means predisposed to the godly. As he spread the straw he grumbled: "A plaguey waste o' good stuff! Far better a' been beddin' the pigs. They dumb creatures is some use to man—"

"Of more kin to some men," said Tobiah, "than are

human mortals, more especially such as serve the Lord!"

"Meanin' me and you, master?" Nahum asked, looking up with little fierce eyes, not unlike those of an old hog.

"Meaning most of those in this house," Tobiah made answer. He had certainly been somewhat mishandled and abused, also the dirt of the back premises was lamentable. "It is a godless place and an unclean; I have seen but one tolerable face here, and were that other than pictured, I doubt but what it would be gone from hence."

"Um!" Nahum grunted. "That'll be the picture of the devil, as the boys scrawled by the pantry door."

"It's the picture of one, Zachary," Tobiah retorted, "a man of profitable discourse, so little akin to any in this house, both in words and ways, that, I take it, his picture was stole by one who did not know him and hung in the back passage for fear a godly face in the light should make folk here ashamed."

Nahum straightened up. "What?" he said, forgetting to notice the last of the speech in surprise at the first. "Master Zachary? You know Master Zachary?"

"So far that I am surprised to find him in this company," Tobiah replied.

"He don't keep this company," Nahum said, "he don't have nought to do with 'em—ague shake the lot of 'em! Though, were things as they should be, it'd be he as was here and they as were in back passages, or outside back doors more like!"

"Ha!" said Tobiah, and a suspicion suddenly came to him. He knew, of course, as did all in the district, the condition of the family at Wythes Hall, the second wife of the old Squire and the banished eldest son. He also knew, since Zachary had said it, that he himself had suffered from the second marriage of a father and was an eldest son. But had not thought of the one in connexion with the other; he had not known Zachary's other name, nor that he belonged to the district; nor yet had he thought him of quite such condition when they talked together last year.

But now the suspicion came to him and he turned to Nahum for confirmation.

Nahum gave it. Though he was, as is seen, ready to quarrel with the godly, he was still more ready to be civil to one Madam quarrelled with or disapproved, if that one were a friend of his earlier master. He confirmed the Dissenter as to the identity of Zachary, and heard when and how they met.

"Aye," he said, when Tobiah spoke of him as of a virtuous and clean conversation, "he was ever a clean shot, as pretty a hand with a gun as in the three kingdoms—and the decoy! Lord, Lord, 'twas pretty! And to think there's nought but that zany here, that can scarce tell a heron from a black goose and don't know a mallard when he sees en, unless en's feathers off and there's sauce and gravy! To think o' that at the Hall and the rightful man, him as knows it, the smell and the sound o' it, wanderin' the countryside like a tinker!"

Tobiah entered into the sentiment; at least, in so far as he held firmly that the right man should come to his own and the crooked ways of a covetous woman not prosper. Consequently he and Nahum discovered some sympathy and discoursed together until a voice above stairs called the old man up.

He withdrew then and Tobiah was left alone, undisturbed for the rest of the evening, except when a poor supper was brought him by a varlet accompanied by one of the fellows who had effected his capture. They thrust the food at him, scoffing in ribald and foolish fashion; for which he warned them that "*Judgments are prepared for scoffers and stripes for the back of fools.*" Further saying, when he looked upon the food, which was good stuff spoiled: "It is clear the old saying is true here—'The Lord sends the victuals and the devil the cooks.' Unless, indeed, the cook maid, unable to distinguish between the servants of the house and the swine—which is small wonder—prepares the victuals for both in one pot."

At that they cursed him, calling him an ill name and

offering to take the food away (which would have been small loss). But they did not, and after another gibe, went out, carefully locking the door after them. Tobiah, left alone, ate the supper, giving thanks for what was good of it and praying enlightenment for the cook for what was bad. Afterwards he gave himself up to thought, though not upon his own case; he was one who remembered the admonition of the Lord and took no thought for what he should say when brought before magistrates and others, knowing both that the Lord would give him a word and that he would be very well able to utter it. So he concerned himself little about his circumstances; but, when he had eaten his supper and removed the wettest of his apparel, disposed himself in the straw to meditate upon the affairs in which he might be called to take a hand. Afterwards he fell asleep, the which was easier in that the light left him was but a short one, and early burnt out.

It had been out a good while, and the hour^u was after midnight, when a sound disturbed him—a key turning in the lock, a quieter and better oiled key than the one which had locked him in. The door was pushed open and Nahum, carrying a small light, entered.

Tobiah sat up; he was clad but in his shirt and hat—there was a mighty draught upon the floor where he lay, so he had to sleep in his hat in default of a nightcap. “What is this, friend?” said he. “Are you come, as the gaoler to St. Paul, to inquire of righteousness and the way of repentance?”

Nahum closed the door. “I know nothin’ about that way,” he answered—he was sadly ignorant in Scripture; “but I know all the ways hereabout a sight better’n you do; I’ve come to put you in ’em, that’s what I have.”

“To let me out? At whose behest?”

“My own,” Nahum answered. “I don’t take orders from nobody but Master Zachary, I don’t. Madam ain’t got no say in my business.”

“But,” said Tobiah, “if you do this how will you stand when it is known?”

"As always, 'cos it won't be known," Nahum returned, grinning. "There are two keys to this door; friends o' mine ha' a use for the place sometimes. We keep a mort o' things here when Madam's away, and if one key's not to be come at, why, one must have 'nother! Madam's got one now, sleepin' with it under her bolster—bad dreams to her! Here," he tapped his pocket, "is t'other, and here it always is, and no one the wiser, seein' they don't know there ever was such."

He lay hold of Tobiah's coat and breeches, not yet dry. "Put 'em on," he said, "and be quick; the sooner you're off the further you'll be before daylight."

Tobiah put on the breeches, Nahum the while explaining that, since he would lock the door on the Dissenter's departure, and since no one knew of the existence of the second key, his disappearance would be a mystery beyond solution.

"They'll think the devil's flown away with ye," he said chuckling, "or"—suddenly remembering his cloth—"maybe the Good Spirits, if so be they're so handy. Anyway, it'll be a pretty dish to set before Madam to break her fast upon."

He chuckled again, well pleased to picture Madam's anger and consternation when she found the prisoner she had undertaken to temporarily house escaped. He knew all about the ambitions towards Justiceship for the young squire, and knew how such an accident would count against it.

"It'll be a mighty good thing for her," he said, "as wholesome as blood lettin'. And you can bear a message for me to Master Zachary. You'll have to quit these parts a while; you can quit 'em that way."

"H'm!" said Tobiah, and considered. If he quitted these parts he could not further declare the commandments of the Lord to Masterton or deal further in his affair. Yet if he remained at large, he would certainly be taken again; and if he remained in durance he would certainly go to gaol; in both of which cases he was like to be stopped from speech. So he halted, considering, until there came to him that deliverance of Peter when the angel had him from

prison, and how afterwards the apostles, clearly with the will of the Lord, sent him swiftly and privately thence to a safer place, where fresh work was found him, while others were raised up to carry on what he had, perforce, left.

"What is this message you would have me bear?" said he. "And where is he to whom it is to be delivered?"

Nahum did not know to a league or so where Zachary now was, only there or thereabouts, what was likely but not certain. "But you'll find him in a while," he said, "if you keep lookin'; there's no hurry the word should be delivered before drinkin', as the sayin' is. But it's well for him to know it some time."

"What is it?" Tobiah asked again.

"This," Nahum answered: "the ole cat's none so easy in her slippers as'd be looked for. It's my belief she ain't feelin' so safe as could sit down to eat a whole hog at a sittin'. I dunno what it is, but I smell somethin' teasin' as sure as a peacock smells rain. And I dunno where it is, the seat on it; not here, I'm thinkin', maybe in Lunnon, but I dunno. Can you have that in your mind, master?"

Tobiah could easily, though he was desirous of more light upon the subject before he undertook to do so. That, however, was not to be got. For one reason Nahum had little he could give; and for another there was no time to spare, the sooner he started and the further he was from Wythes Hall before day, the better it would be for all concerned. Accordingly, he undertook to deliver the message as it stood, and got what particulars he could of Zachary's likely whereabouts. Then, being by that time ready, he followed Nahum out and, when the door of the now empty cellar was locked, upstairs and to a retired door.

Nahum unbolted it. "Fare-ye-well," he said, "and mind, hode to the message."

"I will," Tobiah said, as the damp outer air crept in. "Farewell; the Lord have you in mind for this."

And he stepped out into the night.

CHAPTER XII

OF WHAT BEFELL IN COLCHESTER

THE trust of Tobiah that the Lord would continue the work (anent Masterton and Lady Belton), from which he was held, was not misplaced. When, indeed, is such misplaced? Behold, in May, early in the month, Masterton went from Colchester! Not for words of Tobiah's; we know that he was far from being admonished by them, albeit he was chagrined by them and their presentation of himself and his love in a light other than the one in which he wished to behold them. But for word of Tobiah he would not have gone; and if not for it in his presence, still less in his absence. It was not the Dissenter that induced him to depart, but Lady Belton herself. A brother of hers was to go to Italy that month, and she besought that Masterton would go with him—to protect him, or to advise him, or some other sufficient reason. Masterton could produce a dozen sufficient reasons why he should not go and suggest a dozen better than himself to protect or advise or what not, but he could not convince her he had better stay. Hence, observe, he had to go, for the first duty of a *cavaliere servente* is to serve. To refuse what the lady of his heart entreats as a favour were impossible, and the worst of folly in one who seeks to please her, even thought to grant her desire entails banishment for a time from her side. So, since she could not be persuaded that she did not want this favour—only that, perhaps, it was trouble too great for him to take at her request, he must go.

But as to why she wanted it, who can tell? It may have been doubts and anxieties for her brother; but one thinks that if it were only that they might have been a little allayed by Masterton's reasoning; or perhaps have given place

a little before his desire to remain, if not her own comfort in his company. It may have been some whim or caprice; women are moved by such at times in dealing with the men who are their servants. But she was never given to these, although it must be said she had been somewhat unsettled of late, as one not sure of herself, not sure, perhaps, of Masterton, restless in mind ever since the visit to Wythes Hall and the beginning of the acquaintance between him and Mistress Clarinda. It may have been she sent him away so that that affair might not ripen to a conclusion; or it may have been that some words Zachary Ward said to her on the day of the visit worked in her mind. Or, on the other hand, the Lord may have wrought His purposes without human interference; or He may have wrought through an human instrument—the instrument of a letter which came to her about this time.

This letter, written in a hand she did not know, she found within an open window, where it had been thrown one evening at twilight. There was no name signed to it and no indication from whence it came or by whom. Its contents were these:—

My Lady,—

These are to warn you that it were well did you, on some excuse, send your husband's cousin from you, for harm threatens him in Colchester. I may not tell you from whence or by whom, nevertheless I would ask you to believe that it is so; that the danger is great and the damage like to be serious do he remain, and only to be avoided by his going. It is with your ladyship to show this to him or not, as is good to you, though, seeing his high courage and ignorance of where the danger lies, it would perhaps seem the wiser to withhold it, and to bid him hence on some sufficient excuse of your own framing. Only, as you esteem his welfare and your own peace of mind, in some way and on some pretext have him go.

So the letter, and no signature and no proof that it was true or well founded. Maybe Lady Belton did not all believe it, or maybe she did; one fancies she did, there was that in the wording calculated to carry conviction to her. At all events, awhile later she persuaded Masterton

to go from Colchester, though giving him no other reason than anxiety for the welfare of her brother, saying nothing of the letter, which remained her own secret and an unsolved puzzle to her.

It was on the first day of May the letter was delivered, somewhere about twilight, when the quiet street that ran by the less important side of Sir James' house was empty and no one was about to see. Keren knew the ways of the household well enough to know none would be about at that hour, and so watched for the opportunity of the street being empty. When it was, she came down it and deftly dropped her letter in at an open window, almost without pausing by the house; then went on her way again leisurely, as one taking a stroll.

It was a somewhat clouded evening, pearl coloured, as are the clouded evenings of spring, and with a sweetness very haunting in it. A tree in a garden beyond the house was in full leaf, the green looking pale in the fading light and a bird in the branches singing flutily. The sound of the long notes and the smell of the tree, of opening buds, and young leaves, stirred Keren. Something in her stirred faintly in answer to the season, something wistful, longing. To one who has lived in woods spring comes to town bringing the odours of green things, the memory of damp earth and the green gloom of trees; and with them a yearning as of a bird for air—nay, as of the hart in the Bible which pants for the water brooks. The yearning was upon Keren that evening; as yet only a dumb longing for she knew not what, but a stirring one and growing stronger. It was now five months since her father wrote bidding her remain in Colchester. She had remained according to his command very docilely: no word had been heard of him and, as she knew, the money lodged for her maintenance was not yet exhausted, but it seemed the time must be up soon now. She began to look for some messenger; a species of restlessness, which did not show outwardly, stirred in her, that inner stirring which in some way belongs to the season when things are shooting and growing beyond the place

which is all too straight for them. The twilight in the town, the faint breath of lilacs from some enclosed garden, even the little eddies of soft wind which blew at street corners spoke to her, so that vaguely and in her heart she looked for somewhat, she knew not what.

Arrived at the vintner's she sought first of all for any word or message from her father by chance arrived in her absence; the logician in her sought the concrete as the gipsy felt the other of life. But there was no concrete here, no news from her father. As for the other, that fell to rest, or partial rest, for Betty called her to tie a ribbon and fashion a bow, and Betty with her gay chatter and endearing way drove such things hence.

The girls were alone for that evening, Simon Shipp and Rachel had gone to a small meeting of professors and taken Kate with them, the young girl having of late discovered a great inclination towards the ministrations of Samuel Calderbeck.

It must be said that the departure of Tobiah had not been without profit to Calderbeck—there are ever some who profit by the loss, temporary or otherwise, even of a good man. Tobiah's loss had profited Calderbeck, for it greatly increased his following. Not openly: the taking of Tobiah led other and lesser men to be careful for a time, fearing, through a misunderstanding of the true state of the case, that it might be the beginning of a general severity. But privacy suited Calderbeck and his followers well enough; they were content to meet privately and in small numbers if they could not meet openly and in large. They met so at this time, and wept and groaned and prayed together to admiration, lamenting the wrath coming and come, and discoursing on the Devil and his great and peculiar power now manifest. Rachel Shipp was a foremost one in this following, and her brother Simon, now Tobiah's authority was removed, but little behind her. The girl, Kate, went with them, having, as I say, discovered strong motions towards religion of late, more especially of the gloomy sort sometimes attractive to those of sickly health.

That spring had been an unwholesome one; there had been much rain in the earlier part and the health of many was poor; Kate ailed a good deal, more than ever before. Her aunt Rachel was very watchful for her, asking her often of her symptoms, encouraging her to talk upon them and to take care, and sometimes darkly shaking her head as if there were some mystery here. The which, perhaps, was not the best medicine for the young girl; at all events, she grew worse instead of better under it and under Rachel's remedies, which were quite other than the homely draughts of Betsy Shipp. When, by request, the prayers of Samuel Calderbeck and the select of his following were added to the remedies, matters were not improved. Kate was present on the occasion when the first prayer was made and gave herself to it, as to all occasions of prayer and preaching, with enthusiasm, being much moved in spirit, almost to the verge of swooning or to the declaring of visions.

The prayers put up on her behalf did not seem to be answered, and her health appeared to be impaired rather than otherwise by the exercises consequent thereon; after any such occasion she was most usually indisposed. She was, after the meeting she attended with her uncle and aunt that first of May when Keren delivered the letter. She had many strange sensations in her back and head, and retired early to bed, and the next morning declared herself unable to arise. She lay in bed all the forenoon of the next day, suffering much from a pain in her leg.

About mid-day Keren went up to her with a cup of broth.

"Where is the pain?" she asked, setting the cup on a table by the bed.

"In my leg," Kate answered, and turned away her head.

She disliked Keren no less than of old; more rather than less, and feared her more too. Both dislike and fear had increased as health grew worse, she growing more petulant as she grew more sickly, and more suspicious and more sure that Keren did not regard her sufferings as the others did.

"Let me see the place where the pain is," Keren said, looking down at her as she lay upon the bed.

"No!" she replied, and kept her head averted.

But that was of no avail, as she very well knew; before long she must turn and meet the watching eyes, whatever she wished to do. She did at length with a bad grace, protesting the while that she would not show the place, that there was nothing to see, the trouble was inward not out, that Keren was to go away and tease her no more.

But Keren did not go, and in a while the bedclothes were pushed down, the limb displayed and the seat of pain pointed out.

"Here?" Keren asked touching just above the spot with cool fingers.

"No," Kate said; "below."

"Here? No, is it not here," the fingers had followed down a little.

"Lower," Kate murmured; "it is lower now."

"Lower? Here? No, not here; lower than that. It is lower—lower."

The fingers followed steadily down; and each time they touched, Keren said the pain was not there but lower. And lower it seemed to go as if they, with their light touch, drove it before them—right out at last at the tip of the toe.

"You have no pain," Keren said, looking her steadily in the eyes. "It is gone."

Kate nodded. "It has gone," she said.

Keren covered her and went away.

But Kate was not glad that the pain was gone; she was angry and she was afraid. While Keren was there she was half content, if half reluctant, to have it so; but when she was gone, when her watching eyes and quiet, compelling presence were removed, vanity and indignation asserted themselves.

"She thinks I have no pain!" she protested half aloud.

"But I had, I had! It did hurt me!"

Tears came into her eyes, and she recalled the pain so that she almost had it again. She also recalled the touch

of Keren's hand and the way the pain went before it when she said it did. "I hate you!" she cried, clenching her fists and speaking as if Keren were there. "I hate you and your wicked eyes!"

She glanced over her shoulder, half fearful to see the watching eyes behind her. The fear, which had been joined with her hatred of Keren ever since the affair of the cat, had been increased by several things, notably by what she had overheard of the talk of her elders about Keren's parentage and also about the Suffolk witches. The talk had lain in her mind ever since, sometimes sharpening her curiosity, sometimes pointing her fear. She had not spoken of it, but when alone she often indulged herself with unwholesome thoughts concerning it, as sickly-minded youth will. Of late this habit had grown, fresh stimulus being given by the talk, of which there was much among Calderbeck and his followers, of the power and presence of the Devil, new and strange evils in the world, and the approaching end of all things.

As she lay in bed now, indignantly resenting Keren's doings and scaring herself by recalling the watch of her eyes and the touch of her hand, fears and fancies began to take a clearer shape. They, and her dislike of Keren and the talk there was abroad at that time, began to run together and form one thing: What if Keren were joined with the Evil Power? What if she who bade pain go, also bade it come? It seemed to Kate, who could get a pain by thinking of it, that to lose it by the bidding of one who bade her think it gone, was so fearful and unnatural a thing that any ill might be possible to the doer. What if Keren bade her suffer? If she, unknown, already gave suffering! The Suffolk witches did so. She recalled every word of the talk she had overheard about these terrible women. What if Keren— She broke into a sweat of fear.

Just then Rachel came in. "Child!" she exclaimed, seeing her, "what is it? What ails you? Why are you trembling so?"

Kate did not answer; for a moment she could not, the shuddering to which she was easily a prey possessing her. "I—I'm frightened," she whispered at last.

"What of?" Rachel asked. "What has frightened you? What is it? A vision? Tell me, I pray."

She sat down by the bed and coaxed her to speak; by her demeanour and manner and the solicitude with which she regarded her increasing, rather than diminishing, the excitement of the young girl's mind.

Still, for a little Kate did not speak; for one reason, as we know, she stood in some awe of Keren; for another, she was perhaps a little ashamed and also not really sure what she had to say or if she wanted to say it. Had her aunt reassured her soothingly, told her there was nothing for a great girl and a good Christian to fear, and bade her get up and set about some light household task, it is likely the whole would have passed over.

But Rachel did not that; she encouraged her to talk, and, if not to fear, then something like it. She answered very fully all the questions Kate began to put, with seeming irrelevance, about the special presence and potency of the Devil. She cited words of Calderbeck about him and his power; told of the visions seen by sundry, and kindred things, and in every way further excited the girl's mind.

How much this may have helped Kate one does not know; nor yet how much of what she said was dictated by fear of Keren or by spite against her, or both—most likely both; and most likely of all she did not by that time herself know what she did say. At all events, there it was; in a while Mistress Rachel had the whole tale of her fears and fancies and sufferings, from the affair of the cat last autumn to the affair of to-day.

One can fancy Rachel's dismay; although, as she remarked, it was not altogether different from what she herself had warned her sister Shipp might befall. She said this to Kate, and added a pious hope that the Lord would grant there might not be worse to follow and that they might be in time to avert the evil from Kate and, if pos-

sible, save Keren's soul alive. As one knows, the thought and talk of witchcraft, its discovery and punishment, had a horrid fascination for her; at that season, which was but a short time before many notable cases were brought to trial in different parts of the country, as well as in Scotland and overseas, the thing obsessed her; and the preaching of Samuel Calderbeck, with his conviction of a very present devil, did not lessen the obsession. To Calderbeck her thoughts flew now.

"I will speak with him on the matter," she said to Kate at the end of more than half an hour's talk. "I will consult with him; you must tell him what you have told me; you must tell your uncle, too."

And with various encouraging words she bade Kate arise and dress, while she herself went to seek the vintner.

Now what the vintner thought we do not know. There are some who say he did not think because, poor man, he could not, having but little more mind than a bean, though a deal of obstinacy. This is certain, he was gloomy and morose by nature more especially when, as now, unsoftened by his wife. Also he was fearful of all ventures and given to foreseeing evil, and, like most such foreseers, liable to bring it about by his tempers and timorousness, and melancholy satisfied when he had done so and when his prophecies were thus or otherwise fulfilled. Also he did not greatly approve of Keren or her coming; and he did favour Kate, and was, besides, much under Rachel's thumb now. But against these things must be set the fact that it is a terrible, as well as an unsavoury, thing to have a suspicion of witchcraft in one's household and in a member of one's own wife's family. And such a thing, apart from weightier considerations, does not make for public credit or good trade, and Simon was a sound tradesman, whatever else he was. Moreover, the girl was Betsy's cousin's child and there was good money with her, and how was he to act with Betsy away and the girl's father too? He was a justish man, or at least very anxious to keep within the legal right. And after all Kate might be fanciful, being sickly, poor maid!

One can see the quandary he was put in when Rachel unburdened to him before dinner—and quite spoilt his appetite for the meal. And again after when she equally spoilt his digestion, at most times but indifferent, by bringing Kate to tell her tale so soon as he was sat down in his elbow chair. He did not know what to say or what to think; he spent a most perplexed and distressful time with the two of them and with his own considerations. He had to go to attend business before he had come to any sort of conclusion what to think of the matter, much less what to do in it.

In the afternoon Calderbeck came. Rachel had sent a message entreating his presence to advise and sustain on a subject of distress and urgency. He came so soon as he could, within no long time of Simon's return to his affairs and while Kate was still retired above stairs. Rachel received him alone, and no doubt broke the matter to him with all the gravity and dismay it deserved, and heard from him the exhortations and denunciations she looked to hear. They were closeted together for a time; then Kate was fetched and the vintner called; and, one concludes, the young girl's story told again, losing, one may be sure, nothing in the telling or by the questioning and encouraging of her elders. Certainly her fears can have lost nothing by being communicated; rather they must have been increased by speaking and by the ministrations of Calderbeck, for, far on in the afternoon, when she was borne forth from the room, she was in a more than half swooning state, shuddering and chattering with her teeth, her eyes rolled with fear. In this condition she was borne to her chamber, Mistress Rachel attending; though after a little she came down again for further talk with Calderbeck and the vintner; and later, when Calderbeck was gone, with the vintner alone.

But while this matter occupied Kate and the elders, quite another occupied Keren and Betty; and so fully that the one had no idea anything unusual was going forward, and the other no suspicion during the day that it was serious or touched herself. Betty was in sad trouble that morning,

on account of the loss of the rare and beautiful blue ornament which she had worn at Millander's wedding, and about which there was an old quarrel in the family.

This trinket, a round talisman of lapis lazuli with a ring of gold by which to hang it about the neck, had, some years ago, been presented by an old foreign gentleman, a man of wealth, temporarily exiled from his own country, who, while he dwelt in Colchester, used to frequent the vintner's shop. While there he sometimes saw and noticed Betty, a young maid of winning ways, and, less often, Kate, whom in those days she occasionally had in charge. When the gentleman was to return to his own land he gave the blue ornament as a parting gift to the one or the other of these two. They were together at the time of the giving and no other was present. Betty always said the gift was to her, which, indeed, seemed most likely seeing her more suitable age and greater charm; but Kate declared that it was made to her.

The dissension over it was long, and, even though Mistress Shipp decided in favour of Betty—and probability, Kate never accepted the judgment, and would have secured the ornament, by fair means or other, had it been in Betty's own keeping. As it was not, but in the strong box of the house, it had heretofore been safe from her. Unfortunately, however, Betty had now asked to have it out. She was promised on a visit to her sister Millander at Blue-Pale and, possibly remembering the Cousin Jake and his admiration, desired to take the trinket with her that she might wear it should opportunity arise. She did not know on which day she should go to her sister, that must depend when Robert Stettin should ride to town; but she asked her father to give her the ornament betimes so that she might have it against her going. He had promised to open the box and get it out that morning; Betty was gone to receive it from him, while Keren did the errand she had been bidden and carried the broth to Kate above stairs.

But when Keren came down she found Betty in tears. "She has got it!" she wept. "Kate has the blue ornament! I shall never wear it again!"

"Has she taken it?" Keren asked. "How can she have done so? She shall give it back! I will make her!"

But Betty shook her head. "It is no use," she said; "it is given to her! Father had it in his hand when, a while since, he went to see how she did—he had but just got it from the strong box for me—and when she saw it she began to cry and to say it was hers by rights. At least, so I suppose, that is how she always does when she sees it. At any rate, he says I am to give it to her, it is hers; or if not she's to have it because she is often sick; he says so and Aunt Rachel too! But it isn't hers! And, if one is sick one can't wear it, and it won't become her, her skin is so poor! And the old Mounseer did give it to me!"

And Betty stamped with the sense of her wrongs and her loss in a most undutiful way, and then hid her face and sobbed aloud.

"Don't cry," Keren said. "Dear Betty, don't cry!"

She was fondly attached to Betty, more than to any other in the house; she would have done anything she could to comfort her. But there seemed nothing of any avail, such injustice as this seemed to be beyond any consoling she could offer.

Betty wept hard a minute. "It was so beau-u-ti-ful!" she sobbed; "and I shan't have anything so beautiful ever again!"

Keren brightened at this; if it were the loss and not the injustice which rankled, it was a simpler, if less comprehensible, matter. "I will make you a blue stone," she said. "Don't cry, I can make one! I do not know if I can make one so blue as that you had, but I will make it bigger."

Betty lifted eyes where astonishment checked the tears. "Can you?" she said breathlessly. "But how? You can't make a stone!"

"I can," Keren maintained. "I have seen my father do it; I know how. The things to make it are not very hard to get. I will make you a blue stone for your own."

"Will you?" Betty cried. "Will you really? Oh, come, let's begin now!"

She flung her arms about Keren and started to dance to the door, then stopped. Recollections of tales heard of Thomas Ashe as alchemist and astrologer disturbed her for a moment.

"It is—it is a good thing?" she tentatively asked. "Not magic, or a charm, or any such?"

"No," Keren said; "there is no charm or magic in it. It is but to put things together and to cook them, almost as one might cook a pudding, only longer and in greater heat and perhaps with a nicer exactness."

Betty sighed relief. "Let's do it," she said. "Let's begin now!"

Keren reminded her they had not got the things yet. "We can get them, though," she said; "it is fortunate that your Cousin John takes us on the water this afternoon."

The Captain cousin whose ship was in the river at the time of Millander's wedding, was home again now. He had promised to take the girls pleasuring that afternoon. Betty did not see how it was to help in the making of the stone; but Keren did.

"We must persuade him to row us down the river," she said; "and we must land to rest at a spot near enough to the mouth for the tide to have left dry seaweed upon the shore."

"There are plenty such," Betty said. "But why should we do it?"

"Because we must have dry seaweed for the operation of the stone. We must each bring home an armful. I will bring one and you must."

"Oh, yes!" Betty cried delightedly, "and Cousin John shall bring another, though he shall not know for what. We will tell him it is to concoct a wash to make our faces fair! He is ever teasing me and saying I wash my face with butter-milk to keep my roses bright! What else shall we do?"

"Set the table for dinner now," Keren said. "See, it is time."

It was, though scatter-brained Betty would never have noticed it in her eagerness for the wonderful enterprise. She went reluctantly now and forgot so much of her share of the task that she would quite likely have earned a reprimand from her Aunt Rachel, if not roused suspicions, had not Keren, as usual when the two worked together, supplied what she failed to do.

Dinner was a somewhat quiet meal that day; the two elders, as we know, had enough on their minds to make them so, and Richard was taken up with some affair of his own and Jackman's which he did not discuss with any other. The girls sat silent, as became their years, each too preoccupied with her own thoughts to notice much the preoccupation of others. As soon as dinner was done, they cleared the table together, then changed their gowns and went out quietly. The last precaution was for fear of being stopped by Rachel, who, though she had yesterday given permission for the pleasuring, might at the last minute change her mind, seeing her favourite, Kate, was not of the party. However she did not, being otherwise engaged, and they got out safely. Having visited an apothecary's where Keren purchased a small quantity of brimstone—a wholesome commodity to be purchased in the town since the time of the Plague—they went on to the river.

There they met Captain John, a jolly fellow past his first youth. With him they spent a pleasant afternoon upon the water; choosing, to his surprise, to go downstream among shipyards and muddy tideways, instead of up among green meadows and hawthorns, now breaking into flower. They landed as Keren had arranged, and gathered seaweed left dry by past tides. Keren gathered in silence, looking now and again to the line of the sea, blue as the colour she hoped to fix upon the stone. Betty chattered all the time she gathered, and would have had but little to show had not Captain John helped her, declaring that his little girl—so he called her in memory of a little daughter dead—should have enough rubbish to wash herself black, did she fancy it, even though she was too idle to gather for herself.

The weed, three good armfuls, was put into the boat and brought home, the kindly Captain helping the girls to carry it to the house and stow it in the woodshed behind; at the same time promising to tell no tales to Mistress Rachel, of whom, indeed, he stood in considerable awe.

"Now what do we do?" Betty asked when all was carefully stowed and Captain John, with many thanks and good-byes, was gone away.

"We had best see if Mistress Rachel has need of us," Keren said; "afterwards, when the way is clear, I must speak with Reuben over the wall."

Reuben, the potter's artist apprentice, was the only one of the lads who took any much notice of Keren or who was at all noticed by her. He was artist enough to admire her slim suppleness and the fine finishing of her hands and feet; and she was keen enough to understand his mind and the dreams he cherished there; and both were so far unlike the surrounding folk as to have that in common.

Betty wondered what she could have to say to him about the making of the stone; she wondered a good deal as she went with her in search of Mistress Rachel and tasks—a wisdom she herself would not have shown.

As fortune had it, there was little for them to do. Rachel had too much on her mind to give great heed to them just now; so long as they neither plainly avoided notice or obtrusively thrust themselves upon it they were secure from her observation for that day. In a little while they felt themselves safe to go down the garden together. But this time it was growing dusk, the shadows under the old red hawthorn by the wall were quite deep. Keren paused there and called, the smooth rounded call of a wood pigeon. Soon there came an answer, a less good imitation of the bird than her own, and the sound of feet on the other side of the wall.

"That is Reuben," she said, and mounted on the box the girls kept behind the hawthorn for the purpose.

There was not room for two on the box, so Betty stood below. Keren's voice was a singularly quiet one and Reu-

ben, on the other side, stood down upon the ground, his head not level with the top of the wall. Only a part of what was said reached Betty where she stood. She heard Keren asking for the loan, gift rather, of a pot, some kind which would endure heat. She seemed to know a deal of the nature and qualities of pots. Betty could only suppose she and Reuben had discoursed on the topic sometimes when she had thought them making love or making fun, as she and her admirers most usually did.

When the pot was decided upon, and it took time, for something rather unusual was needed, Keren began to speak of firing.

"Will you fire it for me when I have the stuff in?" Betty heard her say. "It will not hurt the ware. You can put it in and forget it is there till it is time to take it out; nothing will be altered for the better or the worse by its being there."

Reuben acquiesced after some little talk; then asked what it was she would make. She did not exactly tell him, but did not seem to avoid doing so. Betty did not notice quite what she said, but he appeared satisfied with it and the fact that, since he would have the cooking, he would see the stuff when it was done.

After that Keren began to ask about the heat of the fire, and was told that the kiln would be heated to the greatest it ever was to-morrow.

"That is fortunate," she said; "it is what I want"; and she spoke of heats, the temperate, the blood, the glowing and the red in a way that sounded learned to the listener. After that she said at what hour to-morrow she would bring the pot to the wall, and how long she wanted it heated and how gradually cooled. Then she preferred another request; this for a piece of the clay whereof they made the ware.

He fetched some and handed it up with the pot and received her thanks. Afterwards they talked a little of other matters, mostly concerning him and his ambitions and hopes.

Betty stood in the shelter of the bush, wishing they would be quick, so that the work might really be begun.

"How long you were!" she said when Keren stepped down. "Have you all you want? What is the white clay for?"

"To make the stone," Keren answered. "In the operation it stands for the earth, the solid; and the seaweed for the sea, the liquid, the colour; they have to be united, so the old Masters say, by the fiery spirit of Heaven. My father does not think there is any spiritual union; he says it is rather a concoction as of Nature; he holds the last ingredient to be metallic rather than fiery."

"What is it?" Betty began to ask; but just then Rachel called.

"Go in," Keren said. "I must hide these in the wood shed, then I will come."

Betty obeyed and soon Keren followed her, and there was no more opportunity for talk before bed time. None really then, for they were afraid of Kate listening at their door, though she had long retired to her chamber; she had been known to rise from her bed to do that when she had spite or suspicion against them. So they contented themselves with little more talk about the great operation but went to bed quickly and quietly in their usual way.

CHAPTER XIII

OF THE MAKING OF THE BLUE STONE IN COLCHESTER

AT midnight Keren rose; she had preparations to make for the operation of the morrow, and they must be done now, seeing that if they were done in the day she would be liable to interference and inquiry from Mistress Rachel or other members of the household. She did not call Betty. Betty was nearly sure to laugh happily at an inopportune time or raise her voice in excitement or mirth. She was almost sure by some accident to rouse some one, and if she did there would be no hiding her. One always knew where she was in the daytime, her petticoats rustled or her feet pattered; it would be far worse at night. She could never efface herself or be effaced quickly and quietly. So, though Keren knew she would have liked to share in the work, she did not call her, but went downstairs alone, carrying two heavy cloaks with her.

Arrived below she deposited the cloaks and then went to the woodshed where the dry seaweed had been put. She carried it into the kitchen; and, having set aside a small quantity of well charred wood from the hearth, she swept the stone clear of ashes and arranged the weed there. Then she set it on fire. At first she had a little trouble to make it burn thoroughly; but she had built and tended many fires for her father and knew how to make one which would reduce to ash that of which it was made. In a while she had it burning as she wished and could leave it a few minutes. She went out again to the woodshed and brought from there the pot and the white clay which she had obtained from Reuben. She took them to the kitchen and there crumbled a part of the clay, already chalky and ready to fall to dust, while she watched and tended the fire.

Carefully she fed it with the weed, stirring at times or using bellows as seemed best, bending over it so that the glow lit her face and intent eyes, a slim, dark figure upon the cavernous hearth, or flitting across the kitchen as noiseless as the shadows.

When the last of the weed was burnt, and the whole reduced to a small smouldering heap, she left it. She went to the parlour, still silently and without carrying a light; she was curiously at home in the dark, very much more so than Betty or the others. She unfastened the parlour door and, crossing the room to the mantelshelf, took from thence the thunder-bolt, the memento of the conversion of Simon Shipp's grandfather. She carried this to the cellar that was under the shop, to the farthest corner, that which was most removed from the part of the house where the household lay asleep. She took a lantern with her; she must have light for what she would do now, and there was no aperture through which it could shine. She also took the cloaks, hers and Betty's, which she had brought from above; these and some sacks and clouts from the kitchen. She stuffed the crack about the cellar door with the clouts so as to somewhat stop the noise she must make, and put the cloaks and sacks folded upon the floor. On them she set the old brass mortar, which used to stand on a high shelf on the pantry, and in that the thunder-bolt, an oblong blackish thing, in shape something like a short bit broken from a broomstick, in appearance rather as a piece of iron on the smooth outside and glittering metallic within, where it was broken and uneven. She had brought the heavy kitchen poker with her and, taking it by the thin end, she smote upon the thunder-bolt with the other with all her might. The noise was considerable and the force too. The hard substance broke in three pieces. She took out the biggest and fell to work on the rest, beating him blow upon blow, till all were in fragments. It needed strength to do it and a certain deftness in hitting too; but she succeeded in breaking it up, keeping her ears open the while for any sound of the vintner or another disturbed by

the noise, which was loud, in spite of the precautions she had taken. She kept the lantern to hand and the spare pieces of thunder-bolt in her pocket in case of any such alarm; she would, in such a case, have had the light extinguished and herself, cloaks and mortar in hiding before one had descended all the stairs. But there was no alarm. She broke small what she deemed enough of the thunder-bolt, collected what was scattered on the floor and brought all upstairs without disturbing or being disturbed by any. Then she replaced the mortar poker, sacks and clouts with the scrupulous exactness which she ever showed in an operation, and after set about the next thing.

Last evening, when Rachel had given her the keys to open the store-room for some domestic purpose, she had unlocked the still-room door, guessing it would not be tried between then and next morning. It had not been; it stood unlocked as she had left it, opening when she tried it now. There was a balance there upon which Mistress Shipp was used to weigh spices and essences when she made cordials; it was not so exact as that which Ashe had at Lowbole, which, indeed, was of his own fashioning and of a rare accuracy; but it was as good as any in the town and, seeing no other was available, would serve now. Keren weighed her ingredients in it: the white clay dust, the ash of the burnt seaweed, a little of the wood charcoal she had taken from the hearth before sweeping it, and a small quantity of the brimstone she had bought at the apothecary's. She had to break up the last, for she must have all in powder; all, that is, but the thunder-bolt. This, in smallish irregular fragments she weighed last and packed neatly at the bottom of Reuben's pot. The other ingredients she put in packets, keeping the ash separate from the others as she thought it too warm yet to be blent with them. This all done she set things in order, dusted the balance and shut the still-room door, put back the remains of yesterday's log on the kitchen hearth and made things tidy there. Then she took the pot and the packets and the spare remains of the thunder-bolt and hid them in the woodshed.

Afterwards she re-fastened the doors and went quietly to bed, none of the house being aware of what she had done. Certainly none aware that the descendant of alchemists and astrologers and mathematicians had been astir and at work, nor that the daughter of gipsy mother had breathed the dewy air at the door that night—facts which were spiritual as well as actual and perhaps more important in the first than the last; it is the spirit that quickeneth.

It was Betty's custom to sleep until some one removed the bedclothes, pushed or persuaded her from bed and hastened her into her garments, finding those mislaid over night and fastening anything she could not reach. In the old days Millander had usually done this, seldom failing or over-sleeping. Since Keren's coming to Colchester she had done it and never failed until that morning. Then, having been up so much of the night, she slept late; indeed, until Rachel, justifiably indignant to find neither of them below stairs when she herself descended, came up to see what they did. She roused them with a sharp reprimand and hastened their dressing with some deserved rebukes.

There was no time nor chance during the toilet to speak of the operation planned for the day; Keren could only say that everything was in a fair way, and they must come to the woodshed as early as they could, that was all. But, as luck would have it, they could not get early to the woodshed, nor could they find opportunity to speak privately together. Rachel kept them apart; she did it purposely, actuated by what suspicion we know and by a fear that Keren's malignant influence might be exerted upon Betty. She was severe with Keren that morning, setting her to hard and menial work—which had no need to be done now and which there was never need for her to do, but which the spinster held might be a beneficial discipline and at any rate keep her occupied and alone. To Betty Rachel was, by contrast, unusually kind, fussing her almost as if she were ill and keeping her with herself with little easy tasks or talk; which surprised Betty, who was not used to such treatment from her aunt.

But the scheme was not entirely successful. Betty, owing to Rachel's mildness, could come and go, and so get to the woodshed for a while, unquestioned and unobserved. And Keren, docilely doing as she was told and not resenting the hardness, menialness or unnecessary nature of her task, would leave it when she thought fit and give Rachel, Susan or any one else the slip as could no other in the house. So it happened that in the course of the morning the girls got to the woodshed. Keren at once fetched out her packets and began mixing the ingredients together while she briefly told Betty what was already done.

Betty listened eagerly and was much disappointed not to have had a share in the operation, declaring she would have been as quiet as quiet had Keren called her up. However, she quickly got over her pet; nothing could be altered by regretting and perhaps Keren was right, she certainly would have cried out if she had seen a mouse. She was vastly interested in what was in hand now, in the mixing and in the materials mixed; it was wonderful, she thought, that so much seaweed should have become so little ash.

"Give me the pot," Keren said when she had mixed the things.

Betty took it from the hiding place, looking in at the glittering metallic fragments packed at the bottom. "What is that?" she asked.

"Thunder-bolt," Keren answered, taking the vessels and tipping in the mixed powders.

"Thunder-bolt?" Betty repeated, amazed.

Keren nodded. "I told you," she said, "the older Masters direct that the earth and the sea—that is, the clay and the seaweed purified by fire—be united by the fiery spirit of the Heaven. That is it, though my father holds it to be metallic, not spiritual or fiery; the union rather as a concoction by nature, in no way divine."

Betty stared at the pot in no way enlightened. "You did not say it was a thunder-bolt," she said; "you said yesterday what the Masters said, but I did not know it was a bolt. Where did you get it?"

"From the parlour mantelshelf."

Betty gasped. "From there!"

She regarded Keren wide-eyed; of which Keren was quite unaware, being occupied in pressing the powder into the pot.

"Father's thunder-bolt?" Betty said, awed.

"Yes," Keren said, forcing down the powder with her thumbs; "it is fitting, too. Since the blue ornament was yours, and he took it for Kate, he should pay. Unfortunately, it is not much he can pay."

Which reasoning may have been sound, though it reassured Betty less than the thought which occurred to her soon after. "I don't see how he is to know where it is gone."

"Unless he asks," Keren said.

Betty thought he would not hear then if it was she he asked; she certainly should not tell. But she was, none the less, rather uneasy; not on account of this appropriation of her father's property, not even very much for fear of discovery, but because of the nature of the ingredient, which brought the thought of magic again to her mind. But in a little she cheered. "It was a holy thunder-bolt!" she exclaimed joyfully, recalling the story of the relic with satisfaction and more respect than she had ever before felt for it. "My great-grandfather was converted by its means. It can do no harm; it will act as a sort of charm!"

"It is a sort of iron, I think," Keren said; "the thunder-bolt my father used had converted no one, and it did well. I will be pleased indeed if I do as well. Now I must put a lid to the pot."

She took some of the spare white clay and, after moistening it to a putty, neatly fitted a covering over the materials within. Afterwards she took a handful of common clay, fetched yesterday from the garden, and plastered it neatly outside the bottom of the pot, explaining the while that one must not have that part heat too fast.

Betty watched fascinated. "And what next?" she began to ask.

But Keren detected approaching steps some distance off. "Some one is coming," she said. "Go out. You had best go back to the house; there is only to take the pot to Reuben now. I can do that before I am found, even if it is for me they are coming."

But it was not for Keren Livvy came; it was Betty who was wanted, for Robert Stettin was at the door, and she brought the message that he desired Mistress Betty would be ready against the time of his return in the afternoon, as he would then take her back to Blue-Pale behind him. Also, would she have her gear prepared, so that a wagon of his, returning but half loaded, could transport it for her.

Betty, as one may guess, was longing to go to Blue-Pale and her sister, but she would very much rather have waited just one day more. The result of the wonderful operation could not be known till evening; it was not till twilight that the pot was to be fetched back from the kiln. She most greatly desired to be there to see, but it was out of the question; she must go now the opportunity offered; and, seeing the nature of it, she could not even give any hint of her reason for being reluctant to do so. So she set about preparing her gear, folding her gowns, sewing her tuckers and packing her best ribbons and kerchiefs and caps. Livvy helped her, Rachel said she might; she was so well pleased to have Betty go away from Keren that she did all she could to expedite it. All, that is, except bidding Keren help, though that would have been of the greatest use, seeing that she could have sewed, mended and folded better and faster than any one else.

Keren went back to her work when she had delivered the pot over the wall to Reuben, and kept at work all the morning. She did not have the chance of a word alone with Betty until after dinner was done. Then, however, they had a few minutes together, and Betty lamented that she would not be there when the operation was done.

"I did so want to see the stone," she said.

Keren sympathized, but could only promise to put it,

if she succeeded in making it, in the hiding hole the girls had contrived under a board in their chamber floor.

"It will have to wait there till your return," she said.

Betty agreed. "Unless," she cried, as the idea occurred to her, "you can bring it to Blue-Pale! I am sure Millander would have the two of us, and Robert must be riding to Colchester again soon, or Cousin Jake or some one! I will make some one come and bring you back!"

She was delighted with the notion. Keren liked it too, but was not so sure of the carrying out. "I have doubts whether Mistress Rachel would let me come," she said.

Betty said some disrespectful words of her aunt, of which "cat" and "spiteful" were the mildest.

"She has something against me now, I think," Keren said, "though I do not know what. It is not the stone—she has no suspicion of that or that we do anything—I have tried her to see—"

"Oh, no, she hasn't that!" Betty cried. "See how kind she has been to me! She can have no thought that we do anything. I don't believe she has aught against you either. Why should she? You fancy it because she set you work this morning, and not me, though we both overslept."

"It isn't that," Keren said; "it is something different. I don't know what; a feeling perhaps. And it hardly seems to be Mistress Rachel only—"

"Mistress Betty, Mistress Betty!" Livvy's voice cried; "the wagon's at the door!"

Betty ran out with her gear and Keren came with more, Mistress Rachel standing by while they saw it put in. The waggoner was given drink and orders to be careful to lose nothing by the way; and promising that he would mind every single thing he started down the street. After that there was no more talk, only a bustling and getting ready and saying farewell, a little flutter which kept a stir in the house as if it were a sunny breeze of spring; and which, like such breeze, played upon everybody alike, Rachel and Keren too, and brushed other things away. Then Robert Stettin came, and, after a few words with

the vintner and a glass without dismounting, as he was in a hurry to be home, had Betty up behind him. Betty laughed as she was put up and looked back laughing at the bend of the street. A sunbeam, she seemed, with the spring light dancing in her hair, and pleasure and the expectation of pleasure and the gift to give pleasure in her shining eyes. The house, when one turned back to it from watching her, struck gloomy and quiet now she was gone.

Throughout the remainder of the afternoon Keren felt the gloom and the quiet; it blended with the other feeling, the earlier one, and altered it so that it became more vague but not less inimical. She was not set any further work to do, but was left to herself now. Rachel watched her once or twice, but did not utter any more commands or sharp rebukes. Kate avoided her, but she often did; the vintner she once found looking at her askance, but that was nothing uncommon, he was often morose and sour. No one said anything to her; yet she felt there was something in the air; something of foreboding or ill, which deepened the gloom of the rooms, gave ominousness to the silence, even filled emptiness with threatening in some undefined way.

Late in the afternoon Calderbeck came and another of his kidney with him. They were closeted awhile with Rachel in the parlour; afterwards the vintner and Kate were called in. At the end of an half hour Kate was borne out, rigid as in a fit or swoon and with inturned eyes: she was taken to her chamber and lay there the rest of the day. Keren did not see her again. She saw Simon Shipp and Rachel when Calderbeck and the other were gone, and saw that they had something on their minds, notably on the vintner's. Rachel seemed strongly and inwardly excited; but the vintner was very uneasy indeed and undecided too. Keren knew that, and knew by their looks and silences, and by feeling too, that she herself was in some way concerned, though how or why did not appear. At the half hour after six the brother and sister

went out, saying they would be gone some while and giving Susan orders to sit in the chamber with Kate.

Keren watched them go; she thought it likely that they were going to some private meeting with Calderbeck and his followers, and again she felt as if she herself were in some way concerned, though she did not know how. She stood a moment. Susan was above with Kate, Livvy had gone home, Richard was forth on business and would not return till to-morrow, Jackman was occupied elsewhere: the house was very quiet. She went to the parlour; it was empty, though she could still faintly smell the cloth of Calderbeck's clothes; her senses, roused to more than common keenness to-night, recognised it. She stood looking round, subtly aware that something threatened, something was in the air.

She sat down. She was not afraid; the one who knew her best had guessed that she was not liable to fear, less from an unusual courage than from an unusual coolness of mind. It was not fear that held her in the parlour but an instinct, such as leads an animal to sniff the air, which strove to sense what was there. She did not succeed in doing so; it was there, she knew, but it eluded her. She took some sewing and began to ply the needle. Quietly she sat and sewed, her eyes intent upon the stitches, but alert, all her senses alert. She sat very still; but within her something which had before slumbered, stirred.

At twilight she put away the sewing and went down the garden to the potter's wall.

Reuben was waiting for her on the other side, but was in such haste he had time for no more than a word.

"Master bade me go an errand ten minutes past," he explained; "there'll be the devil to pay if he finds me not gone."

He handed over the pot, and, asking her to come to-morrow to tell him what it was she had made, he hastened away.

Within the pot there was a hard dark-coloured substance, bluish-green rather than blue and not so even-

coloured as she had hoped, otherwise much as the stone of her father's making, and, like his, fast to the pot, the inside of the vessel smeared with it, the whole one mass. She looked at it under the wall in the twilight, and her eyes gleamed just a little. She did not want that Reuben should stay and talk; she did not, at that moment, truly care that Betty should be there. She had made the blue stone, she was satisfied with that; not triumphant—she had looked to do it, not elated—the stone was not perfectly blue; but quietly, inwardly satisfied with that satisfaction which the Makers feel and cannot and do not wish or think to share.

She carried the pot indoors to the kitchen. There was more light there than elsewhere; also various implements, as a poker and a mallet, from among which she could find one to help her break the pot away from the stone. By this time the dusk was deepening fast. The kitchen, when she got there, was very shadowy except under the big window which looked on to the yard and the backdoor in the wall. There was a table below the window. She stood by it to do the breaking. The vessel not being of quite the right material, was more annealed to the contents than that of her father's operation; she had trouble to break it away. As she did so the flaws in her product were revealed, and she cogitated where she had erred in the making that her result was not so good as his.

While she was thus engaged and deep in thought there came the jar of an opening door.

She looked up; Rachel and Simon Shipp came in at the doorway opposite the window—an entrance she had never known them use. She did not move; it were useless to do so. They must have seen her and, in a sort, what she did, as they opened the door. She continued what she was doing, only tilted the pot a little, so they could not see what was in it.

"Keren!" Rachel cried.

"What do you do?" the vintner demanded, and Keren knew that, for some reason, he was afraid.

"I have been making something," she answered.

"What?" they spoke together and almost breathlessly. (What does one of ill repute concoct alone at twilight?)

"Open, and let us in," they commanded.

She turned to obey. The pot was almost all broken away now, the irregular lump free of it except at one place. She carried all together with her as she turned from the window and freed the lump before she reached the door. She stooped and drew back the bolt with her left hand—the one towards the window, and with her right pushed the stone into the mass of her hair. When the door opened, letting in the stronger light without, there was nothing but broken potsherds in her hand, and others, smaller, upon the table.

"Where is it? Where is this evil thing you have been making?" Rachel demanded.

Keren pointed to the broken pieces.

"What is it?" the vintner asked, closing the door and standing by it, a good way off, to peer at them. "What is it? You have no business to do this!"

He spoke waveringly, fretfully and tearfully too; but Rachel stood squarely forth.

"What spell do you work?" she demanded. "Against whom do you dare to work a charm?"

"It is no charm," Keren answered. "I make a blue stone like to the one Betty had."

"A stone!"

Only God can make stones as only He can make snow and rain, though the Devil helps his servants to make cheating counterfeits of them. The brother and sister gasped, and their faces blanched as their eyes met.

"A stone! The Lord defend us! Witchcraft!" the words came in breaths.

Then Keren knew.

Suddenly she knew; the foreboding which had been gathering during the day, the gloom threatening and surrounding, subtly lurking but growing impalpably, were revealed. She knew how she was concerned in their secret

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consultations and observings; she knew both what they feared and what threatened; that which lurked in the twilight had taken shape.

She cast her eyes down modestly. Through her steady pulses there began to run a little thrill, as when before the dawn there runs a thrill through grasses and long-sleeping trees. "Yes," she said, speaking soft and low, "I made a blue stone. I took the thunder-bolt from the parlour shelf for it."

"The thunder-bolt!"

She nodded. She had begun to smile a little and in her eyes there was a shining—the smile and the shining some men show at the first sound of steel. "The stone is bigger than Betty's," she said, not glancing at the staring faces, "though not so blue. I will make a better by and by. You would like me to make a better by and by?"

She looked up, her eyes ablaze now.

They shrank away from her.

"What?" she said, looking from one to the other and speaking sweetly. "Are you afraid of me? You are not afraid of me, Cousin Shipp."

She stretched a hand towards the vintner.

He backed against the wall to avoid it. "'Get thee behind me, Satan!'" he breathed. "Avaunt! Go! I defy thee; I defy thee! Go!"

His voice rose with the words, but Keren spoke gently. "Go?" she said. "To my chamber?"

"Yes, yes," he cried eagerly, and moved from the door.

"No!" Rachel said—she had the more courage of the two—but he did not heed her.

"Go!" he commanded. "Go now! I will speak with you in the morning;" and he muttered words which sounded like a prayer.

Keren moved to the door; she went almost slowly, as if she were loth to go, and looked back from the doorway and again from the stairs.

She went up the stairs to her chamber. She closed the door audibly when she was within and secured it with the

wedge she had fashioned some while ago to protect herself and Betty against the intrusions of Kate. Then she waited. Not for long. Soon Rachel's step cautiously ascended the stairs and approached the door. The bolt outside was shot home; she heard it, and heard the spinster go down again. Soon after the parlour door was opened and shut, and in the room, which was below the one where she was, the murmur of voices began.

Satisfied there would be no interruption she took the stone from its hiding-place in her hair, and possessing herself of a piece of paper—the blank leaf torn from a Bible I regret to say—she wrote:—

"There was no witchcraft in the making of this, only good art. Do not believe what they say. I pray that you keep it to mind you of your gentle friend

"Keren."

Then she wrapped the lump in the paper and put it in the hiding hole. Afterwards she sat down by the open window, which looked out on to the enclosed garden.

She sat there a long time, quite still. Darkness deepened and dew fell; everything grew dark below, and sweet odours came up out of the gloom from damp earth and dew-drenched flowers. Behind her the room was darker still; the room, the very house, seemed lost in the blackness—to have receded into it, away from her. They were much farther away than the outer world, dim in the starlight and very close to every sense of sight, hearing and smell.

The voices below went on and on, a low murmur, rising a little now and then; suspicion and trouble and evil, threatened or feared, in their continuous muttering. They were of the house, of the ominous gathering gloom, of the past day—the things lost now in the dark. She just heard them, but no more; they did not matter to her. She sat waiting till they should cease, looking out into the night; noting the faint rustle of leaves, the stir as if the earth

breathed in sleep, and the separate smell of the trees, recognising each with a freshness which was almost new, as one recognises separately gathered friends that are welcoming back.

At last the voices below stopped; there was the sound of opening and closing doors and heavy treading about the passages, the vintner seeing all was secure for the night. Then steps on the stairs, the vintner's and the lighter ones of Rachel; they came up, paused, then approached her door more cautiously, and paused again. Rachel drew nearer and listened—the sound of her breathing came at the crack—then reported to the vintner that all was quiet. The door was gently tried to be sure it was really fast; then she moved away. They both went away. Doors opened—Keren heard them—heard the two bid each other good-night, Rachel uttering some exhortation or text; then the doors shut and quietness slowly settled.

Still she sat without moving; for some half hour more she sat. Within, the house settled gradually to the heavy and complete silence of a sleeping household. Without, the earth stirred to the impalpable life of a spring night. The stars shone clearer now; a nightingale in a garden a little way off began to sing, deep-throated single notes and then a cascade of sound. Down in the grass a breath stirred and the leaves of the apple-tree moved as if fairy folk were waking.

Keren rose and left the window and began to prepare. She moved about the dark room very quietly, not with stealthiness but with the soft light step of ease. She hummed a little once; she could not sing, she had never made any musical note before, she hardly did now, only once or twice her breath shaped to a low sweet sound as she set about her preparation. She took off her gown and put on a darker, plainer one; she exchanged her shoes for the strongest and heaviest she had. She gathered a few things into a bundle, as few and as small as could be, and bound it to her back. She took the cap from her head

and braided her black hair neat and close. There was nothing to catch the light or the eye about her when she came again to the open window.

She pushed it to its widest, and slowly and with difficulty wriggled herself feet foremost through it. It was very difficult, for the aperture was narrow, and the sill small; one had said, had one seen it, it were an impossibility; and impossible it would have been had she been other than slim as a boy and of an uncommon litherness. But she was that, and she managed to work her body through and hang, her hands on the sill and her feet dangling below in the air. There was an apple-tree beneath; not quite close to the wall and not a very big tree, though thick growing. She swung herself out a little, then let go and dropped. The top branches parted as if to receive her; they closed as if to embrace her; the main stem stopped her fall. Small twigs broke under her weight, but the damp leaves pressed on her face and the feel of the bark, the smell of the greenness were as friends and home to her. For a minute she remained in the heart of the tree, not thanking God, yet mutely glad with that formless gladness which is too great for words, and perhaps akin to prayer. Then she climbed down, and keeping close under the wall, made quietly and quickly for the door in it. It was bolted on the inner side but not locked. She drew back the bolt and lifted the latch.

As she did so, as her finger was on the latch, she heard a sound. Far off but clear, sweet and shrill with the sweetness, the poignancy, half-joy, half-pain, of no other thing on earth—pipe notes masterly played—the wistful haunting sweetness of the Song of Love that Zachary Ward had made in the wood.

She went out and closed the door after her, and set out in the direction of the sound with feet that were so light they hardly seemed to touch the ground.

CHAPTER XIV

OF THE GOING OF KEREN FROM THE VINTNER'S IN COLCHESTER

ON an evening while Zachary Ward crossed a common a good way westward of Colchester, there met with him Tobiah the Dissenter.

"What!" Zachary cried when he recognised him, which he did afar off, though he had not seen him for almost a year. "What, my godly friend of last spring! My man of war in the Army of the Lord! Well met after these many months!"

"Well met," replied Tobiah and halted. "I have been searching for you," said he.

"For me?" Zachary asked. "Not these many months, I trust, sir? That were an honour I do not merit. I might even say with David, *'the King of Israel is come out to seek a flea, as one doth hunt a partridge upon the mountain.'*"

"Then you might say foolishly," Tobiah responded, "for the comparison does not hold; you are over long in the limb for a flea and I have no fellowship with Saul, King of Israel. Let us sit; the path is too narrow for two to walk abreast, and I have a message for you."

They found a spot sufficiently sheltered between the fragrant gorse bushes, and Zachary asked of the message and from whom it was.

"From one of the unregenerate," Tobiah answered, "though of a kindly sort and singular well-disposed to the godly for one who dwells in an unregenerate house; the man, Nahum, the house, Wythes Hall."

Zachary's eyelids flickered, but he only asked. "When had you talk with Nahum?"

"A while since," Tobiah answered, and gave the message.

"Thank you, friend," Zachary said when he had heard it, and no more except: "I am beholden to you for having travelled so far for that."

"It is not solely for that that I am abroad," Tobiah admitted; "there are reasons which set me forth a while since, at which time I promised this Nahum to seek you out. Doubtless I would have found you sooner, had not I been stayed of the Lord on the way at a farm where an old and obdurate sinner lay near his death."

"Ah!" said Zachary. "You ministered to him? I am glad that this trifle of mine did not hinder you."

"Nought hinders when the Lord calls," Tobiah made answer. "I abode there more than a week, and, with the Lord's help, wrought mightily both with the living and the dying. In that time, however, you had removed from the part to which I had direction and I have, by consequence, been some while following and coming upon you. Howbeit—"

"Howbeit," Zachary said; "here I am, and, as I say, beholden to you for the pains taken and the time spent"; and he would have passed on to other matters.

Tobiah, however, set them aside; "For pains," he said, "I do not reckon them; for time, I am at leisure. I do not for the present return to Colchester; it is desirable that I should be removed from thence for a season."

Zachary cocked an eyebrow at him. "Is it possible," said he, "that some difficulty and dissension has arisen? But no! I do not think it, in such warfare you were ever victor. Like Daniel of old, if there is any occasion against you it must be sought in the matter of your worship."

"In a sort, yes," Tobiah said, and told what had befallen; not, however, omitting to ascribe his taking to have at least been threatened by one whom he had offended by reproving him on the matter of adultery.

"I have known that bring a man into trouble before," Zachary observed, and inquired particulars.

Tobiah gave them and Masterton's name as well; adding, at the end, an account of his escape and the opinion that it seemed desirable, for Nahum's sake as well as his own, that he should remain a while from Colchester.

"Affairs there," said he, "can doubtless prosper without me for a season. The Lord likely has work for me elsewhere; indeed, I have already found some, as I have said. Should I find no more I can still return to the town and testify before magistrates and others."

Zachary held the last unlikely to become necessary. "The world is wide," he said, "the unregenerate many; he who is bent to reform, reprove, repair and contend for righteousness need not want for work even in the highways and hedges. A mighty fair place, the highways; still fairer, at this season, the hedges. You behold one in much admiration of them, and one pledged to a life among them, travelling as light as the Israelites in the days of the Wandering."

"Pledged to a fiddlestick!" said Tobiah.

"A pipe, sir, a pipe," Zachary corrected, fingering the instrument in his pocket.

But Tobiah did not heed; he rose since the other did, but pursued his argument. "The Israelites," said he, "did not travel over and above light. They carried, not only their kneading troughs and all their stuff, but also that whereof they had spoiled the Egyptians; a wisdom you do not seem to have shown."

"Fie, sir!" Zachary said, glancing back; they were threading their way among close-growing bushes, he ahead. "You, a follower of the prophets and preachers, who carried neither scrip nor coat, but set out upon their journeyings taking no thought for the morrow! You speak thus!"

"Sir—" Tobiah began; but the other cut him short.

"One must travel light," he said, "if one would come to the land at the foot of the rainbow. But, travel light enough, I think one may get there, even go in the glamour of it a part the way."

"Sir," said Tobiah, "you speak foolishly."

"'Tis a thing that appears foolish to those not bent upon the pilgrimage," Zachary answered. "Nevertheless, it has its glory. I myself have once seen a field, a common pasture field, filled to the brim with coloured light—the foot of the rainbow."

"That were an accident of Nature," Tobiah said.

"No doubt," Zachary allowed; "also an allegory."

But Tobiah did not desire to hear the interpretation thereof; he dealt in soberness and sense, not allegorical fancies. Talk which at whiles was serious and at whiles a whimsey pleased him not.

"This," said he, "is a folly, and out of the consideration. We spoke, sir, of you and your doings—"

"I," Zachary answered, "a poor journeyman; my doings, to travel to Norwich, there to take service with a learned doctor."

"Humph!" said Tobiah. "A goodish way, Norwich."

"A goodish way," Zachary agreed, "and I shall be a goodish time upon it, for I go on foot, and the season is so fair that it ill becomes a man to hurry; it were an insult to the fair lady, Nature, to do so with May but just come in."

"Humph!" said Tobiah again, and then began to speak about Wythes Hall and the message he himself had brought from thence.

On these subjects he received no encouragement to talk; but that did not hinder him in the least. Did Zachary answer briefly, he did not resent; did he not answer at all, Tobiah was able to speak the more; did he walk fast, Tobiah could go as fast and keep plenty breath; and for difficulties of the way, should Zachary choose the most entangled paths he cared nothing, bushes of gorse and catching branches of blackthorn, white now as snow, were no hindrance to him when he would converse.

"I may take it, sir," he remarked at length, "that you do not think the message I brought you to be of any great import?"

Zachary shrugged. "The kindness of one who holds us tenderly is always of import," he said. "Nahum, old dog, is ever my good friend and well wisher."

"Yes," said Tobiah, but persisted: "I may take it you do not count his message of value? That the woman, your step-mother, designated old cat, is uneasy, does not concern you?"

"No, sir; I fear it does not," Zachary answered; "I am not so good a Christian as that."

"But you are, it seems, so great a fool as not to see anything that may concern you in her uneasiness in her ill-gotten gains!"

Tobiah spoke severely, but Zachary was undistressed. "I am concerned for nothing," he said cheerfully. "A blessed state."

"It is not," Tobiah said, and then began again to speak of the message.

"If this woman is uneasy," he maintained, "it would not be without reason; either her conscience smites her that she has done wrong and gained by fraud and transgression, or else she does not feel herself safe in the same. In either case the cause of justice and right might be advanced and should show head."

"Worthy sir," Zachary said, "I admire your wisdom; admire now mine. These things for which you are tender have not the slightest desire to show head, nor yet to be advanced; they desire an honest retirement—and no rain this side of bed-time."

"Desire," retorted Tobiah, "is not that which governs the servants of the Lord. They are concerned with right; they are up, they are doing; they, I would have you know, would, with the help of the Lord, look into such a matter as this. It should be searched into, I say; the whole should be looked into, the cause found, the root searched out."

"The root is rottenness," Zachary answered, and quoted to him: "'The love of money is the root of all evil.'—*'Woe unto them that shall lay house to house and field to*

field.'—'*An inheritance may be gotten hastily, but the end shall not be blessed*;'” and other similar words—which convinced Tobiah no whit.

“The Devil,” he observed, “also quoted and wrested Scripture to his purpose.”

“Ah!” said Zachary. “My acquaintance with devils is but small.”

“Mine with fools is great,” Tobiah replied; “and they are a class more helpful to the Devil than even are knaves.”

“Ah!” said Zachary again. “I suspicion that, german to that class, are those men who learn nothing by experience, who, having got themselves trouble by meddling with one man about his cousin’s wife, straightway seek for more by meddling with another about his step-mother.—Ha! I see ahead a wayfaring man; perhaps we may get direction from him, for, truth to tell, having in the last while been going about and about as in a maze, I have but a poor idea where we are.”

He called to the man and inquired of him the way.

He stood some while in talk, Tobiah waiting beside, not put about that his words were thus cut off; there would be other opportunity later. At length Zachary had learned all he desired to know, and, bidding the wayfarer good evening, turned to Tobiah.

“A matter of some six or eight miles onward will bring to a village of sorts,” he said. “Does your way lie there with mine? Or do you seek the hospitality of a farm which would seem to be some two miles behind us on the other side of the common?”

“My way is yours,” Tobiah answered.

“I am honoured,” Zachary said. “I hope, sir, you will not mind the custom I have of singing by the way?”

And before Tobiah could answer, certainly before he could open again on the subject of Wythes Hall, he began to sing and sang the Trinity at considerable length:

"God, Father, called the world to be;
God, Son, He gave the air so free
(He brought us to eternity);
The Holy Ghost, He made the sea.
Glory to the Trinity!

"The One, He gave this life of ours;
The Other, work for half the hours
(And some adversity);
The Third, our needs and, eke, our powers.
Glory to the Trinity!

"The One, He gave to do and dare;
The Other, strength to burdens bear
(And some infirmity);
The Third, the good things for to share.
Glory to the Trinity!

"The One gave sorrow and relief;
The Other, pardon to the thief
(And blessed charity);
The Third, for sin the grace of grief.
Glory to the Trinity!

"The One gave joy of land and life;
The Other, lover, child and wife
(And bless'd maternity);
The Third, sweet peace and godly strife.
Glory to the Trinity!

"The One, He made the woods so fine;
The Other gave us corn and wine
(And graced our jollity);
The Third, He blessed the field and kine.
Glory to the Trinity!

"For all we have and all we be,
Come then and praise the Holy Three!
Let wind and earth and sea sing praise,
The world and each thing there upraise
(With poor humanity);
Songs to the Ancient of all Days—
The Glorious Trinity!"

"That," Tobiah admitted when he ceased, "is a godly song. I do not know that I hold entirely with the doc-

trine of it; indeed, this exaltation of the Trinity is somewhat papistical; but the ditty is well enough and has a pretty smack of thankfulness and godly rejoicing in the Lord's mercies small and great. Where had you it?"

"From my old nurse, who was Nahum's wife," Zachary answered. "And she had it from her nurse, who was also her mother, and she from hers, and she, perhaps from hers, perhaps from some jolly priest—in which case, sir, you have right, maybe, to scent papacy. Howbeit, as you say, papistical or no, it has a rejoicing and grateful sound." He hummed some notes, then broke into singing the first verse again.

Tobiah nodded his head and beat his hand in time to the gladsome music, and when it came to the "*Glory to the Trinity*" joined his voice to the other's. (Had he been of the unregenerate sort, as that relative of his the mighty hunter, of whom he once spoke, it is possible he might have been a good companion at a song and a mighty chorus man.) To the carol of the Trinity he lent himself, one may think before he was fully aware, but certainly not unbecomingly. It is never unbecoming to rejoice in the Lord.

By this time they were entered a small wood, latticed green and gold from the westering sun and very fragrant with spring flowers, late primroses and early bluebells and hawthorn opening on sheltered boughs. They traversed the winding paths, hid in drifts of last year's leaves or green with moss, singing as they went, in goodly fellowship.

And when they were free of the wood they came to a common, more golden than the one where they had met, though showing less glowing by reason of the sunset being obscured now and the earth pale in pearl grey light. After that they crossed a green, where geese fed and cowslips grew, and came to a rutty lane; and by other lanes at last to a village where was a church and an inn—both in some need of repair.

They remained that night at the inn, meeting with no

company but the innkeeper—a doltish man thick in the wits—and retiring early to the single guest-room the house afforded. It is likely that when they were retired to this chamber and the door fast for the night, Tobiah had thoughts of opening once more on the subject of Wythes Hall. But he did not, for Zachary discovered a further curiosity in the business which had brought the worthy man into trouble, and would not rest content without every detail of it, even such as how he came to be mixed in Master-ton's affair and how he had heard of it.

"The maid, Keren-happuch Ashe, spoke with me of it," so Tobiah answered the last question, and Zachary started.

"Keren!" he cried. "She spoke with you? She knows? But how, but where did you meet with her?"

"In Colchester, to be sure," Tobiah answered, "in the house of her father's cousin, Mistress Betsy Shipp, or rather the house of Simon Shipp, husband of the same."

"Simon Shipp, vintner?" Zachary said. Then he laughed; after all there was no great marvel in it. "To be sure!" he said. "Why, you yourself told me last year Ashe had these respectable relations. To think I never thought to conclude it was to them, to Colchester, that Keren went when her father departed, one does not know where!"

"I do not perceive, sir," Tobiah observed, "that you were concerned to know where the maid went, nor that you are concerned now."

But Zachary perceived. "I have been in Colchester," he said, "and lately."

Tobiah frowned. "Would you have gone to visit the girl?" he said.

"I would," Zachary answered, "and I shall. There is an old kindness between us and a friendship begun very far past." He sat down on the bed, looking before him and smiling a little, though perhaps sadly.

"And she is in Colchester," he said, "the foster-daughter of the Forest gods; in the house of our respected townsman, Shipp."

"A very fit place for her," said Tobiah; and when Zachary did not answer he added: "A fitter than for you, I think, sir. More especially since you are set out for Norwich, in the way to which place Colchester does not lie."

Zachary laughed. "I'll save time," he assured him; "it'll be a saving to go there, for I can then take the straight highway, and that will be a clear saving in the long run, though I travel extra miles to get to it. And if that is not good enough reasoning for you, here is more—I do not count time at all and, I suspicion, the learned doctor who looks for me, does not expect that I will; he looks for me this week or next; when I come I am there, that's how it is; or, at least, how it will be."

Tobiah did not approve of such careless proceedings. He held time a precious commodity to be properly used and accounted for, and punctuality a virtue to be maintained: he said as much now.

But Zachary did not listen, he was thinking again of Keren. "You say it was she who told you of this matter of Masterton and Lady Belton?" he asked. "Was it she who put you in the way to speak to the man?"

"It was," Tobiah answered; "for a maid she has considerable discretion."

"Yes," said Zachary slowly, and again fell thoughtful.

"I would," said Tobiah, "that you showed as much in the matter of the woman at Wythes Hall."

Zachary roused himself. "Sir," said he, "your interest in my poor affairs overwhelms me; it embarrasses me, I feel I cannot deserve it; and I fear in your earnestness for it other and weightier concerns will be forgotten. Do not, I entreat, allow me and mine to come between you and aught else. Your evening prayer—the time of that is come, I am sure; do you delay longer, I fear sleep will overcome you, as it does me."

He yawned prodigiously, and kept on yawning and would hear no more that night. Which was the easier, as Tobiah,

having done a great day's walking, was himself inclined for sleep.

By morning it had come to Tobiah that no harm would be done by Zachary's going to Colchester to pay a visit to Keren at the vintner's, and some certain knowledge might be gained thereby. He himself, he decided, would walk a part of the way with the other, halt a moderate distance from the town and there await his return. By this means he would know when he did return, also how affairs prospered in the town, and could obtain from his house, by means of Zachary, sundry monies and other things of which he stood in need.

He communicated this. "I would," said he, "since you are planned for the town, be obliged if you can learn how things stand affected towards me there; if there is any search out for me, or if the matter seems like to have dropped or soon to be dropped. Also, when you see Mistress Keren-happuch, inquire of her if aught has befallen in the matter of the gallant and the lady, and if the Lord, so far, has been pleased to speed their reformation. Bear her word from me that I hold it may be she will be called upon in the matter, and that I desire she will be in readiness should occasion arise. Also, when you are in the town, I would request you to go to my house—the key is here upon my person, I will give it you. Take it, unfasten the door, and bring me sundry things whereof I have need."

He listed the things to Zachary and gave him word of some ordering he would wish done in his house, which, as we know, he had left unpreparedly.

Zachary readily undertook to do what was required, and betimes they set out together. They travelled all the forenoon, making very good pace, both being mighty men of their legs. They conversed as they went on many things tending to edification and some to diversion, Zachary being one who knew somewhat of the art of jesting that is (usually) seemly. But when the words "Wythes Hall,"

or even the more common ones "old cat" were mentioned, it seemed always to bring upon him the need for song; and it must be said his singing was notable and joyous and his songs often apt to matters in hand and provided with infectious tune or catch.

Thus, pleasantly enough, they journeyed together. At mid-day they took a meal of bread and cheese under a hedgerow, and, later, pushed on again, coming, well on in the afternoon, to the neighbourhood of Earl's Colne. They did not enter into the village but went north of it, Tobiah holding it not advisable to show himself too publicly in a village within this distance of Colchester until he knew how his matter stood. He halted in the wooded country beyond the river and Zachary went on alone.

It was latish when Zachary reached the town; too late, he thought, to be becoming for him to present himself at the house of the vintner. But just late enough and dark enough to suit for entering Tobiah's house, where one admitting himself in broad daylight might be liable to question, if not as to his doing, then as to his connexion with the owner and the whereabouts of that person.

Tobiah's business did not take very long, his house being neat and his directions plain. When it was done Zachary set about fulfilling the other of his requests, and by casual inquiring and talk with sundry learned how matters stood against the worthy man. After that he sought out an inn, choosing a small and quiet one in a retired street. There he ordered an humble meal, and after eating it, retired to the poor but cleanly room allotted to him.

By this time it was late, sober folk within doors; in this quiet neighbourhood almost all folk within and many abed. But he was not inclined for bed yet, and sat awhile by the open window, breathing the breezes, which even here smelt of spring, and thinking again of Keren, foster-daughter of the Forest gods, dwelling in town. And from thinking of her he got to thinking of the day when he met her last spring, adream of Masterton in the woods, And from that he got to fingering the pipe, his old companion. Softly he drew

notes from it, soft at first then gradually louder, the plaintive notes, wistful and poignant sweet, of the Song of Love he had made for her that day.

And as he blew, looking out into the dimness below, a shadow flitted into the empty street.

Keren!

He dropped the pipe and leant out quickly. "Keren!" he said, incredulous yet persuaded it was no other than she.

She stopped and looked up. In the dark he could only see her face a light blurr; but he heard her voice, the curious quiet voice he knew. "Yes," she said, "it is I."

Quickly he was down and out beside her. "How came you here?" he said. "Did you hear me thinking? I came to Colchester some two hours gone and thought it then too late to see you! And you, you see, are come to me!"

"I heard the pipe," she said; then added: "I go from Colchester to-night."

"To-night!"

She nodded.

"Now? But why? How is it? Has your father sent?"

"No," she said. "But the time has come. It is spring. Moreover, at the vintner's they begin to suspect me as a witch."

"*What!*" He gripped her arm with a grip that hurt. She moved a little, but not much.

"They have begun to suspect me," she said quite calmly. "Mistress Rachel Shipp and her brother, and I suppose Kate, no doubt Kate. It began to come to a head to-night; they fastened me in my chamber to-night—so I came away."

He had drawn her into the deep shadow by the house wall; in the dark one could not see his face. "Does any know you have gone?" he asked gravely.

"No," she said; "who should? They will not know till morning, by when I shall be well on the way to Lowbole. I was planned at the first to set out for there, but when I

heard the pipe I thought I would seek you out before starting. I do not well know the way, and you can put me in it. Also—I desired to see you again.”

The level of her voice dropped a little at the last; the pipe notes and the thought of the player were, as the smell of the dew and the trees at night, in a sense the call of home, and the stir of a yearning indefinable.

His hand on her arm pressed gently. “I will put you in the way,” he said. “I will take you to Lowbole.”

“Will you?” she asked. “Can you do it? It is good of you! But it must be now, I fear, without delay, that I go from here.”

“I know,” he answered. “Stand in the shadow a minute. I will within, pay my score, procure my godly friend’s belongings, then we will start and be far before morning.”

He put her into the densest shadow and hastened into the house. He was not long within, although he had to arouse his host to receive payment and to hear that he had got a message bidding him elsewhere immediately. He left the man all muddled with sleep and very obscure as to what had befallen and why he went, and speedily came outside again.

Keren slipped from the deep shadow as soon as he appeared, but kept close under the high wall till they came to the end of the street. She kept as much as possible to the shadows while they were in the town, stepping light, and with eyes and ears alert; this more with the wild things’ instinct for cover and flight than from any real thought of pursuit or observation. There was, indeed, small risk of observation; there were few people about at that late hour, almost none in the ways chosen by Zachary, who knew the town well. What few they passed were intent upon their own business—usually not of the sort to court attention. Nevertheless, Zachary breathed more freely when they were clear of the town, and when, the river crossed, they were out on the north road with the last house behind them.

He slackened the pace a little then and explained that he had not led to the Chelmsford road, which was the one

likely to be taken in starting for Lowbole. "But I think," he said, "it is the best for us not to take it, seeing that search is more likely to be made for you in that direction; I propose that we go this way for a while, and after decide how to turn about. I have money and goods which I have undertaken to bring to my godly friend, Tobiah, who lies out beyond Earl's Colne; I will, with your permission, deliver them to him in the morning while you lie up in a convenient place. Afterwards we will consider how best to come to Lowbole without touching spots where you may be inquired for."

Keren cared little which way they went; all ways were the same to her, all unknown and all fair because free and leading to freedom. Her spirits had risen higher as the road rose, and she breathed deeper as she breathed the breath of the night. It was not easily she would be taken again in body or in soul.

"It matters nothing which way we go," she said. "But oh!" she drew a deep breath, "how beautiful to go! How beautiful is the night!"

Zachary agreed with enthusiasm. "Dear Goddess Night!" he apostrophized, "that sets man's soul free and bids him play the world is young again! That throws wide the doors of faërie and makes mere mortals gods and every wind a breath divine!"

"Yes," Keren said, "yes"; and spread her hand to feel the damp in the air, and smelled the dew on the grass field beyond the hedge and the gorse beside the road. "I had not known it one-half so sweet," she said softly, "nor the world so fair!"

One knows that Zachary was with her there, with her in anything that savoured of the call to be free. She could have found no companion more fitted to such mood, less likely to suggest fears, soberness, or repining for comforts left behind. What was behind was speedily forgotten; almost they forgot from what she went; they were out on the road in the dark, the night was fair, the world was wide; and, having nothing and fearing nothing, and owing al-

legiance to none, not man, time nor duty—here was freedom supreme.

Pretty early they left the road and struck away westward, following more or less the direction of the river, but keeping to the higher land north of it, so as to avoid the many windings and also the few villages beside the stream. In the higher country there were but a few farms, all dark now; for the rest, no house or sign of the habitation of man. Fields with the dew on the springing corn or on the meadow grass where sleeping beasts lay; lanes dark between deep hedgerows where only the scent of primroses told they were there; commons where gorse flowers showed faintly and rabbits hardly moved for steps' approach. A fair land in the dusk of May night. A wonderland in the silver shine of May dawn. Those who have seen the dawn step white-footed down forest ways or across common land, those who have felt the quiver of her pausing and seen the earth sigh and then quicken to the soft shy passing of her feet—will know what these two saw before they came to the hill above White Colne. The dawn had come, the sun was near to rising, and the mists of the valley and the sky above as the halves of a pearl rose-flushed for his approach, when they paused there.

CHAPTER XV

OF THE JOURNEY OF THREE TO LOWBOLE

BETWEEN Earl's Colne and White Colne, in a suitably retired spot, Tobiah awaited the return of Zachary. And to him Zachary came in good time in the morning; much earlier than Tobiah, who had not looked for his coming till late, expected him. As he came he cursed; he cursed himself and cursed Tobiah in several languages (the Middle Dutch is reckoned by those of experience as the fullest mouthed for the purposes of cursing). He cursed both himself and the other for fools and mud-heads and other things.

Tobiah rebuked him sternly and afterward said in sorrow as well as anger: "Sir, I looked not for this from you."

"Nor I neither," Zachary made answer, "nor yet from you. To think between us we should have done this! To think we should have been each so busy with our own puddling affairs, and other people's—as to almost have this to happen! You minding the morals of Masterton, I the matter of Nahum and Wythes Hall, each deported from Colchester, and she nearly caught in a charge of witchcraft!"

"Who?" said Tobiah. "Explain yourself."

"Why, Keren," Zachary made answer, and Tobiah got to his feet.

"Where is this?" said he. "What is it?" and he started to go. "You can tell what you know of it as we are upon the way," he said.

Zachary's face relaxed; he loved the man for the good folly of his promptness. "No need for haste," he said, "she is almost within shouting distance of us, by an haystack where she slept for an hour or so. I need not really

have cursed the both of us thus, for no harm is done: but hearing of the business from her, and considering upon it as I came here, put me again into a sweat with myself for what might have happened. I ask your pardon, sir; 'tis not often I am taken with this folly, never to my remembering since coming to years; but there are reasons here."

"Tell me what has befallen," Tobiah commanded.

Zachary obeyed, for so he had arranged with Keren in the talk they had had since her awakening. He held the Dissenter might be helpful, and at least could not be hinderful, since there was, at present, no returning for him to Colchester. He had some opinion of the worthy man (as, indeed, who had not?), and rather desired counsel, since he foresaw that difficulties might not end with the journey's end at Lowbole, where, it was probable, Ashe was not yet returned.

Faith in Tobiah was not misplaced. He heard him out with sundry questions, notably about Rachel Shipp and Calderbeck, whose hands he at once suspected in the matter, and who he called, the one, a querulous woman soured in her inwards and with her head turned with the wind of vain doctrine; the other, a blind leader of the blind and a good husbandman for Satan, with his tenpenny devils and smellings out of evil and other paraphernalia of mischief. After that he turned more directly to the matter in hand.

"You have the maid here, you say?" he inquired. "Have you anything purposed as to the disposing of her?"

"She is purposed," Zachary answered, and told him how Keren was planned to go to Lowbole and he pledged to take her there; also the possible difficulty that they might not find Ashe returned when they arrived.

Tobiah considered, and for awhile remained undecided whether or not to approve, and if not what else could be done. But in a little the matter was opened to him and he saw clearly what was best: "I will go with you," he announced. "I will also go to Lowbole, and if this fresh difficulty arises when we are come there, the Lord will doubtless show how to deal with it."

"Yes," Zachary said, but hesitated a moment. Finally, however, he agreed to Tobiah's coming, conditioned that Keren should approve. He proposed they should repair to the haystack and put it before her at once.

Accordingly they went. And found her where Zachary had left her, in the cleft cut in a last year's stack, not any the worse, apparently, for the night's journey—nay, the better rather, for it seemed as if a spring of lightness had been born in her, and as if some old invisible burden had slipped away.

To the plan of the Dissenter going with them she agreed. Also to the way which Zachary proposed they should take, although he warned her it was long. "Fifty miles at least," he said, "most likely more, for by-roads wind, and when one goes by woods and commons one is apt not to go the shortest way. But I think it the wisest for us, for we can thus avoid any place where you are likely to be looked for. And it is certain you will be looked for, if not on account of this charge, then because Shipp's mind misgives him for having lost one committed to his care."

"It will misgive him to some purpose when his wife comes home," Tobiah observed grimly. "A very proper discipline for a foolish man, which may the Lord bless to his improving. Which way, sir, do you purpose to go?"

"I would bear westward," Zachary answered, "not turning much to the south till we are beyond Dunmow; the country betwixt here and there is very lonesome, few villages of size, and those avoidable. We would then go south, either through the Rodings or through the Hatfields, and come to the Forest, at the north-east side. It would take us, I think, perhaps, four days to do it, for there are no direct roads in that part and the going in places may be but indifferent, though pleasant enough."

"H'm!" said Tobiah. "Can you spend four days upon your feet, mistress?" he inquired of Keren.

And when she said, "Fourteen, if need be," he turned to Zachary and asked—

"How of this business of yours at Norwich?"

"That can wait," Zachary answered, "for ever if need be. The learned physician may get him another assistant if it pleases him, or I another master; it was but an on and off engagement. I make no other, and, I fear me, do not always keep these."

Tobiah did not approve such careless dealing; but it would need more than his disapproval, or even his most weighty words, to alter Zachary; nothing short of braying small and making anew was likely to remedy him, and not that without some other ingredient added to the old man. However, to satisfy the Dissenter now he wrote a letter to the physician of Norwich, saying that he might come, or he might not; that it might be this month or next, or in some future; and that should another assistant replace him, it were well, and if not, equally well. Leaving all much as if he had not written, and the physician free to do, as he certainly would without the communication, what suited him best. Then he arranged for the letter to be transported to Earl's Colne, and from thence to Colchester, from where were posts to Norwich. Then putting the matter from him he fell to planning the day's journey.

It was determined not to go far that day, seeing it was the first Keren would be upon the road, and she had had but a short share of sleep. They would go a certain distance, they were too near Colchester for it to be wise to remain where they were; but they would make the march short and the mid-day halt long.

It was a pleasant country through which they went, well timbered and well watered, with small, gently swelling hills and fertile valleys. At first it was finely cultivated, with substantial farms and halls here and there upon it; later it grew more open, woods and commons, or else wide pastures but little enclosed, and with houses very few and far between, and no villages at all upon the way they took. It was but indifferent going, it must be said; the by-roads, by which they went, and which were no more than lanes or cart-tracks, very rutty, and the bottoms where streams ran, deep in mire. Still it was all passable, there had been

little rain since Easter and the mud was nothing formidable; indeed, on the high land the ground was quite dry and the grass of the commons and the paths in the woods most sweet travelling.

By the way they held conversation, Tobiah inquiring much of the doings of Colchester and the ways, sayings and behavings of sundry. What he heard did not please him, and he planned for the reprimanding and correcting of several when he should be returned.

"Which, as I have warned you, had best not be yet," Zachary reminded him.

Tobiah snorted somewhat. "When the Lord calls me I go," he said.

"I doubt if He will call you yet," Zachary said; "for one reason there seems to be some business for you with us; for another the one now against you in Colchester is not to be sneezed at."

Tobiah admitted the weight of the first argument, but clearly rather grudged at the other.

"Who is against him?" Keren asked.

"Madam at Wythes Hall," Zachary answered. "Our good friend got out from Wythes Hall when Madam, having undertaken to have him in safe keeping, thought him secure within. As a consequence, she feels her credit shaken and herself flouted, as well as fears that she has disobliged where she wished to oblige. So she is doing what she can to get him back again; although, one fancies, she would oblige quite as much by merely keeping him safe out of Colchester. She is a doughty enemy, is Madam; not one to venture within reach of if she has got good cause against you."

"As concerning myself and her," Tobiah remarked, "you may speak wisdom of her; but as touching your own affairs—"

"Oh, my affairs," said Zachary, "they always call for song. Will you have the Song of Love?" he asked Keren.

And when she said "Yes!" he sang it—to the considerable disapproval of Tobiah.

"An idle ditty!" he said.

"But somewhat sweet?" Zachary suggested, and blew some of the haunting notes upon his pipe.

"Idle!" Tobiah repeated, the more firmly perhaps that the notes were haunting.

"I like it," Keren said. "I think in sorts it is wise, too."

Zachary did not ask her when she had come to think so, or remind her of what she had said before. Wise folk do not ask of thoughts and feelings outgrown; they, too, have sloughed the skins of their souls in the course of growing wise.

Later Masterton was spoken of; this when they halted, as they did betimes in the afternoon in the lonely country out beyond Gosfield. While they reposed themselves there on the edge of a wood Tobiah asked Keren of Masterton, how affairs went between him and Lady Belton, and if she herself had done aught.

Concerning the first she could give him no information that he desired to hear, for when she left the town matters seemed as before, certainly no better, between the two. Concerning the last she told him of the letter she had writ.

"I do not know that it will avail," she said; "but it may, for I think she now holds him so far tenderly as to greatly wish his welfare and fear his hurt. She is, I think, of the kind that desires the good of those she loves even at the cost of her own loss—which seems a thing rare, though many, notably men, believe they so love."

"H'm!" said Tobiah, though not at all approving. "There is," he observed, "a certain circuitousness in what you say you writ which is not in all commendable."

"But which may possibly do the business," Zachary suggested. "The inducement to protect or save a man is most often operative with good women (and some others); there is a deal of the mother in most of them. And the leaving secrecy to discretion is no way to ensure it, for it in-

vites the lady into the conspiracy, where the most her sex have some little liking to be."

But Tobiah still disapproved. "I hold with straight dealing," he began to say, when Zachary remarked—

"Straight dealing of some sorts has been known to bring saints to durance before sinners to repentance."

"And if so, sir, if so?" said Tobiah stoutly. "There is a witnessing for righteousness first, and such witness is not lost. Concerning that durance at Wythes Hall, whilst there I heard report that this gallant, Masterton, had begun to pay court to Mistress Clarinda Ward, your half-sister. Have you word of it?"

Zachary, as we know, had; he admitted it now. And when Tobiah asked him how and when, he answered—

"When I was last at the house; when, indeed, I met with the man himself and Lady Belton and Sir James."

"Ho!" said Tobiah, and from that began to speak of Wythes Hall and Zachary's claim there; this to the interest of Keren, to whom the subject was new.

He had not, however, proceeded far when Zachary exclaimed: "The sun! Observe the sun! Do you, by it, perceive what hour it is?"

Tobiah did not, for he scarcely glanced that way; but Zachary said: "Sir, you doubtless feel with me that the time has come that one of us sought out whatever house it is whose chimney smokes beyond the trees, and from there bought food for the famine of this household. Shall it be you or I?"

He rose as he spoke, which brought Tobiah also to his feet, for the worthy man chose always to have dealings with mankind; he never knew but that the Lord would give him a word to utter.

Zachary and Keren were left alone, he lying his length among the dead leaves, she sitting upright against a tree-trunk.

"I did not know this of your family," she said; "I passed the gates of Wythes Hall on a day in the autumn. I did not know you were of it."

"No," he answered, "I suppose not."

"It is strange," she said, "I never before thought of you as belonging to a family or possessing kin. You were—as the sun or the moon is—you were; that was all. I never thought a before or after."

"Like Melchizedek," he said, "'without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.' There is much to be said in favour of that; I have ever held Melchizedek a figure very romantic."

Keren said "Yes," but carried the talk of his family no further, perceiving he did not wish it. Instead she asked if it were true that Masterton had begun to pay court to Mistress Clarinda Ward.

"In a sort, yes," he answered, "though I am by no means sure it will come to anything. It is, I should say, rather an affair thought suitable by her friends and relatives and his, than one of his deliberate planning."

"His friends and relatives? My lady? Does she desire it?"

Zachary was not sure how far the lady desired it, nor yet whether she would continue to do so even if she had begun that way. "Though certainly," he said, "he would remain handy to her if he married Clarinda; and so married he might be regarded as well settled—she has beauty and a handsome dower. I suppose my lady might think these desirable for a friend she wished well."

"I see," Keren said, but she was thinking of Masterton now rather than Lady Belton. "And you think," she said at length, "that he is considering upon this marriage—any marriage—when he loves?"

Zachary shrugged. "A man does not always do what he considers upon," he reminded her; "though if he does—such things are done, you know. He cannot wed the one he desires; it is on the whole well he should wed; this one is fair and dowered and would appear to have the approval—the whole match would appear to have the approval of the First. If he weds the girl he pleases the

First and is not necessarily cut off from her; he would not, I fancy, hold himself more cut off from her than before."

"Is that how he regards it, you think?" Keren asked.

Zachary rolled over and lay looking before him along the ground; he did not greatly like this letting in of daylight upon a dream hero.

"The world is not the Garden of Eden," he said, "one must not mete by that measure. After all, he would be doing little other than taking the second best."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully, "that is so—I think that is what he has done before, known the best and taken—or done—the second best. That, perhaps, is what made him, when one saw him fairly, seem somewhat poor."

Zachary glanced round, and then quickly away, although there was nothing in her face he might not see. It was not he who had let light in upon the dream place, the hero stood in the cool light of day before ever he had spoken. He was glad, most extremely glad. Yet with the instinct of men to defend their sex, he spoke, if not for this man, then for those generally, who take the second best.

"At least," so he concluded his defence, "one is not risking one's neck with straining for the moon when one takes the candle at hand. The man who sits down and eats of the fleshpots of Egypt does get his belly full, even though the steam of the viands blots out the vision of the New Jerusalem; and if he does lose his belief in what may be round the corner, he keeps his breath by not following after it."

"You, I trust, practise this wisdom?" Keren said; she knew better.

He laughed. "There is ever something round my corner," he said. "Also, I must admit it, on the whole I would sooner have belief than breath, it travels further, one has to leave the breath in this world. Nay," he sat up and spoke emphatically, "I will give you the last word of my experience and the wisdom derived therefrom—believe in

the possibility around the corner; most usually there is one—and if not, then the belief is cordial and worth the having.”

From that they fell to talking of other matters, with the intimacy and ease of two who truly know each other, and know what each the other means by what he says, and are not afraid or ashamed, nor would be were they bare. An acquaintance such as does sometimes exist between two, not necessarily of an age or sex though sometimes so—such twos as do not have to dress or undress their minds for one another, and who will need no reintroduction or squandering of words on “Good-day to you, sir” and “I’m pleased to find you here, Madam” when they meet in a better world or a worse. A rare thing, perhaps, but one for which, when found, God be thanked.

In the course of time, some little time, Tobiah returned. He brought word that the house beyond the trees was that of the bailiff of the Gosfield estate—a poorish dwelling, but the only one for far, and the people of it willing to provide shelter for the night.

“There lives there,” said he, “a man of the Presbyterians, mighty disputatious in the Word of the Lord. I look for profitable warfare in doctrine and the Scriptures. The woman of the house seems kindly disposed.”

Saying this, the last but as an afterthought, in no comparison in importance with the first, he had them to their feet and on the way to the house.

Arrived there they were, as he had promised, sufficiently well received; the woman, though somewhat grey and worn, as good wood which has seen much service, gave them welcome enough, and her man, somewhat short of speech and long of visage, showed himself satisfied at least with the return of Tobiah. The accommodation was small, the house being but the ruin of a farm patched up, but there was room; and though the fare was plain, there was enough of it. The chamber, beyond that of the couple, where Keren lay for the night, was most exceeding clean; that it was bare mattered nothing to her; had it been more bare

it is likely she would still have slept well. As it was, she slept without dreaming and began the night before dark, retiring to bed so soon as supper was done. Zachary also fell asleep betimes, stretching himself upon the settle in the kitchen, while Tobiah was still disputing powerfully, and profitably. He disputed late on many matters of doctrine and the interpreting of the Word with his host—a man versed in the Scriptures, though sometimes stuck by a word of length in the text, being but a poor reader.

Tobiah would fain have carried the disputations further in the morning, several thoughts having come to him in the night. But the other was called forth to a sick cow before he was astir, and not returned when he must take the road. So, conveying some lengthy messages to the wife, he paid her for their entertainment, and with his companions started upon the way again.

Zachary had computed four days for the journeying to Lowbole, holding that sufficient even when allowance was made for deviousness of route, losing the direction, and badness of going in places. But in four days they did not accomplish it; this because they stayed upon the way. Not so very much upon this day, a Saturday it was, and a fair sunny day. Leaving the Presbyterian with his cow, they started betimes in the morning and travelled well before halting at mid-day. The halt was made at a village where they saw a man set in the stocks upon the village green, which is before the church and parsonage.

Seeing him to be of a religious sort (he had, indeed, been set in the stocks for declaring against the papacy of the Church in the time of service), Tobiah admonished the few idle gathered about him, and set about striving to release him. The which seemed as if it might have been done, seeing the stocks were old and insecure and the idle inclined to offer neither opposition nor assistance. Zachary offered none either; he had sat down upon the green when the admonition began, Keren beside him, and they continued to sit. They still did so when out from the parsonage came the parson. In great anger he fled

forth, calling upon Tobiah to desist. To the which Tobiah gave no heed at all; whereupon his reverence fell upon him to stay if need be by force.

"Sirs!" Zachary said, rising, "let me entreat you, if not to be of one mind, which may not be possible, at least to recall that ye are brethren in the household of the Lord, albeit in different compartments thereof."

He laid hold upon them both—and his hold was most remarkably firm, quoting from the Latin as he did so.

At the Latin the parson swung round. "A scholar!" said he, regarding him sharply; "and contending for this Crop-ear!" and he demanded to know what he had to do with Tobiah and if he were in this attempt to break the peace (by which he meant the stocks).

"In that I am not concerned," Zachary answered; "this doughty knight tilts alone at this windmill; but being joined with him in other assays and having something of a taste for breaking lances thus myself, it would ill become me to interfere with the chivalry of another."

"What!" cried the parson, and he took Zachary by the hands and almost seemed as if he would have embraced him. "Thou hast read of the incomparable Don?" And he spoke a sentence in sonorous Spanish.

Since Zachary had also read the great tale of him of La Mancha both in the native language and in the English, he could cap the sentence with another, and laugh with his reverence at some jest therein.

After that nothing would do but that the parson, a student and reader—not only of the sacred text, must have Zachary to his house to dine. And because Zachary, then the others, for he would not have gone without them. He presented them both, Keren as the daughter of a learned man whom they were escorting to her father; Tobiah as a powerful preacher of the Lord. And to dinner they all went, with the proviso, however, that Tobiah should not say grace.

"None says grace in my house but me," the parson said.

Afterwards, however, he relented, and at the end of the

meal, having said some two words in Latin himself, he permitted Tobiah to give thanks. This the worthy man did very suitably, adding a supplication that the Lord would turn to His service the many good parts his reverence had shown he possessed.

At the which his reverence laughed, and then fell once more to the talk of books and men with which he had beguiled the meal. They sat far into the afternoon conversing, Zachary and his host and Keren with them, she bearing some share; enough to puzzle the parson as to her educating, still more as to her mind, and most perhaps as to her gift for pertinent silence when she had nought really to say—a thing somewhat rare in women, especially the young and the old of them.

At last, however, it was time, and something more, that the travellers were on their way.

"We must go find our Master Valiant-for-the-Lord," Zachary said; Tobiah had gone forth when dinner was done to seek the godly man released from the stocks.

The parson frowned at the name. "A pretty time," said he, "when every cobbler and tinker and vagrant wayfarer has his own doctrine and pretends to the impudence of expounding it! Time was when the commonalty, and the gentry too, took their religion as it was given 'em and no talk about it. Now a man picks and chooses and quarrels with it, for all the world as if it were a wife! And talks about it! Every mad Jack talks about it, as if he knew the inside of the mind of the Almighty and held the pattern of the only way to Paradise! There's no decency left in these days, and no respect for church nor clergy neither—though, I own, they pay respect here or I know the reason why. 'Tis a pity we've not Queen Bess back again!"

"She and her times did a deal for our England," Zachary agreed, "and bred a sturdy lot of free and independent men."

At that the parson laughed, but told him that a scholar and a gentleman should know better than to speak for

Crop-ears. "I'll wager," he said, "we'll find the two of them at fisticuffs over some point of doctrine!"

"I'd take you," Zachary answered, "were it fair; but it's not, seeing I know my man and the weight of his eloquence; the others by this will be compelled to listen to him, if not to assent."

And this proved to be so; they found Tobiah upon the village green enlightening the other, against his will, as concerning grace and predestination. Matters upon which he, of late in the stocks, held so wrongly that Tobiah after said he was not greatly surprised that the man got himself there on some count or other.

Owing to this long halt the travellers were not able to get so far that day as they had looked to. But they did not concern themselves on that account; time was their own, and if they did not cover the distance one day, they would another. The country where they were was lonesome, houses few and far between and, they being long off the main roads, no inns to be come at. However, they happily found very pleasant shelter for the night; this at the farm of Little Rakefires.

The folk of the farm were well-to-do and hospitable, and staunch Dissenters too, so one can believe they opened their doors to Tobiah and those with him. They made them more than welcome, spread a full table for them and put linen upon the best beds. The mistress of the house bustled here and there, with a bowl of curds or a tankard of ale to stay the stomach against supper time, and a plenty water and good homespun towels to wash hands and feet withal. The master of the house, meanwhile, sent his son and any lad about the place to such as dwelt within reach, to let them know that a preacher was come to him and would doubtless open the Word on the morrow. It was taken that the travellers would, of course, remain over the morrow, since not only is the Sabbath no day when godly folk travel, but also it is the day of days for preaching.

Accordingly they remained, Tobiah seeing here an occasion from the Lord and an opportunity for preaching

where it was seldom heard. And on Sunday, in the barn behind the house, he preached to the farmer and his wife and household, and as many as had got the news. There were more than one had looked for in so lonesome a spot; but those who first got word made effort to pass it on to others, so that as many as could for distance were assembled. There was profitable discourse for them to hear, both at the meeting and also during the day, the people very attentive to hear and thankful to do so, for the place was remote, preachers fallen upon evil times and professors often lean for want of the manna of the Word. Tobiah saw plainly that the Lord had led him hither and blessed him in his going.

The next day they started upon their way again, the folk of the farm refusing to take money for their entertainment and pressing upon them a cheese, a plum loaf and other food, more than they could carry, to sustain them upon their journey.

The day was less fair than the former ones had been, but the weather held for a while and they set forth briskly. During the morning they fell in with a vagabond couple; a man of family broken in fortune by the war and, likely by wild life too, come now to the roads, but still followed by the faithful woman he had culled carelessly from some good home in gayer days. She held a baby in her arms, the sole one of those she had borne him which had lived. Keren carried it awhile for her; it was the first she had handled and she did it awkwardly, though the child was very quiet in her arms, a little, perhaps, as the squirrels were quiet. She walked beside the mother, a few paces behind the men, her low, level voice never reaching to them; as the other woman, by infection, also dropped hers somewhat, these did not know of what they spoke together.

At mid-day they came upon an high road and there parted company; the couple, bearing some small gift from the travellers' scanty store, taking one way, the others the other. The three followed the high road for a little, and whilst upon it met a thief being carried to Chelmsford As-

sizes. Keren, seeing the strong party a way off, slipped into the bushes by the road with a silent celerity which had been creditable to a stoat, and there remained unobserved until thief and captors were gone by. But Tobiah stood forth and inquired the cause of the fellow's apprehension, and spoke good words to him of exhortation and repentance and of God's mercy. This thief was the sole one they fell in with in their journeyings, and he under durance. Their way, for the most, was too remote for such ill folk; the tracks and lanes they followed, where they followed any and were not on grass and in woods, did but go from farm to farm, or hamlet to hamlet, used by almost none but the labouring folk and offering no prey for robbers or footpads. Also, it must be said, the appearance of the three travellers, which, indeed, well bore out their means, did not lay them open to the suspicion of valuables, rather marked them as comrades of poor wayfarers, should they meet any.

In the afternoon of this day rain came on, not heavy but enough to make them so far wet that, when a while before twilight they came to an inn, they thought to stay there for the night. The place was of no considerable size, but the only one for far and already had guests of some sort.

For this reason and because Tobiah and his companions were bedraggled with the rain and mire, they were received with scant courtesy. This the Dissenter resented, advising the landlord to better manners and more civil Christian behaviour. Whereupon the man told him plainly he had best go elsewhere, the house was not the place to entertain ranters.

Zachary, who had stood without during the colloquy, looked in here and remarked sweetly: "It has not, indeed, the appearance of often entertaining so respectable folk."

The landlord turned on him at that and words ensued; which, however, would likely have ended in their being entertained had not Keren said—

"I do not think this a very desirable place; there is so

loud a death-watch ticking in the walls it would be ill sleeping."

The landlord's face whitened at this; he had himself last night heard the tick of the warning creature which Keren's acuter hearing distinguished above the noises of the day; but he denied stoutly there were any such.

Keren, however, only said: "I hear it, I hear two; the noise will be louder at night; moreover, the house has an ill, musty smell. Let us on, we shall get but little wetter than we already are."

And they went.

They trudged some way further along miry roads, seeing no house, till about twilight they came to a solitary forge. By that the rain showed signs of abating, so they halted, hoping it might cease while they dried themselves by the smithy fire. But the smith would only consent to this on condition that Zachary and Tobiah blew the bellows for him. They agreed, and, taking off what decency would allow of their garments, they spread them to dry, and then took turns at the work. Tobiah blew with such violence that the fire burned mightily, though he still had breath enough to contend of the Eternal fire and of perdition and repentance. Zachary, when his turn came, blew discriminatingly and with a perfect discretion, as one who understands the metal-working art; for which the smith gave him no thanks, any more than he did Tobiah. He treated the two with surliness and contempt; though showed a little better behaviour to Keren, who he bade help him once or twice with pincers or tongs and at whose dark face and deft hands he looked with some approval.

"I'll buy the wench of you if you're minded to sell," he said to Zachary at length.

"Sir," Zachary replied politely, "that is impossible; *her price is far above rubies*. Also, she is most entirely her own, not any one's to buy, sell or give."

The smith did not understand and seemed to think this might be the beginning of a bargain. He started to haggle; whereupon Tobiah rebuked him sharply.

"Is the wench yours or his'n?" he then demanded, and would have said more to worse purpose but Keren spoke here—

"Are you sure you would find the goods to your liking?" she asked, looking up with that concentrating in the eyes which Kate disliked and feared so.

The smith did not answer, but stood stupidly looking at her. Before he was ready with words Zachary, who had opened the half door, said—

"The rain has ceased, we had best be on our way again."

And they went, leaving the man muttering ill words.

It was quite dark now, the sky heavy with clouds promising more rain in the near future, though for the present it had ceased to fall. There was a damp steam in the air, clammy though fragrant, and on everything—grass and bush and ground—moisture lay thick. In the darkness and the mist they could see but little way; though, had it been clear, they had not seen far, for the district was hilly and much grown with trees in clumps and small coppices. So far as they could discover there was no house, not even a light, in sight; the smithy left behind, they seemed to be in a completely lonely country. They plodded on some while, missing a road they thought to take in the dark, scarcely escaping the water that lay across the way and finally turning, without knowing it, into a by-lane which narrowed and narrowed and grew almost impassable. When this had happened they called a halt. In the corner of a neighbouring field there was to be discerned the dark hump of a barn; and, after parley, they turned their steps towards it. Finding the door unfast, they looked in. There was a plenty of dry straw within, and, seeing the plight they were in and there was no house in sight and the sky promised more rain, all agreed they might go further and fare worse. They fortunately still had a goodly portion of the food they had brought from the farm, their clothes had been dried at the smithy, and the barn seemed weatherproof. Tobiah and Zachary, old wayfarers, had fared worse many a time,

and were well content with this for themselves. As for Keren, she was not of *the feeble folk or the women who are at ease*, but the daughter of a gipsy mother and by no means unhappy under the roof of a barn. Nay, rather, happy, in that it brought back to her her attic chamber at Lowbole with the crossing beams and the smell of thatch.

The next day was a day of rain, the fine, all-wetting rain of spring, and the travellers deemed it better to remain where they were for the most of the day. Tobiah made one excursion, his shoulders covered with a sack found upon the straw; this to find the farm to which the barn belonged and there purchase food. He was a while gone, the house being a good distance behind a hill and the people thereof churlish and ill-natured. He brought back but a moderate quantity of victuals, for which he had been asked (but not paid) an immoderate price. These they ate in the barn, the enforced hospitality of which Tobiah had not deemed it desirable to mention to the owners. Afterwards they settled themselves to profitable talk on various subjects—as the character of the Sin against the Holy Ghost, the nature of Chaos, the duty of a brother (or other) as his brother's keeper, with others not of an idle sort; each of the three bearing a part in the conversation, which was further enlivened with stories and examples, pertinent to the matter in hand, and tending to edifying as well as leading to fresh discourse; very profitable.

A while before the time of sundown the rain ceased, which Zachary perceiving, he proposed they should start upon their way again. This they did, and, getting back into the right road and walking steadily and not losing the direction, they came to a small and respectable alehouse by supper-time. There they were comfortably, if humbly, lodged for the night; and from thence they started betimes in the morning, a most exceeding fair morning, with the earth very clean washed and fragrant smelling from yesterday's rain.

But of their travelling and all that befell them, there is, unfortunately, not space to speak at length; although there

is much that might be told—as of the thatchers at Beauchamp Roding, with whom Zachary would tarry awhile, saying—and it was true—that they did the work the longest and worst way; and who, very obligingly, let him do so much as he would to show them a better, while they reposed themselves under a neighbouring elm. There was also the man and wife, met disputing on the way to Great Dunmow market, whose difference Tobiah was fain to hear and compound; and which he compounded, they sinking it to join and turn upon him, the which did not much incommode the good man, he being more mighty both in word and deed than the one or the other of them, or the two together. Then there was the old soul whose shroud Keren finished to sew at the cot by Greenstead green, where they halted one mid-day for water. Keren saw her when she went to the well, sewing difficultly, being blind with years and stiff-fingered with the approaching end. Which seeing, the girl asked to finish the shroud for her; and finished it while Zachary and Tobiah rested upon the green. For the service the old woman gave her a sprig of rosemary from the plant by her door, saying: “For thy bridal, child.”

Whereat Keren laughed, a low happy laugh, and said: “I am for no man’s bride.” None the less she put the rosemary within her gown.

All these things befell the travellers, and more besides which cannot be related; any more than can those other wonders of opening flower and spreading leaf, new every day, every hour, which made the journey a very glory for at least two of the party. Think of them, then, in this our gentle country in the month of May; in by-ways and upon commons, crossing wide greens or finding paths in woods; meeting folk here and there and greeting them, more often meeting none, for they chose the lonesome parts. Impeded by mire sometimes, and sometimes compelled to follow brimful streams a while before they could find a crossing, but not put about by such difficulties. Holding profitable discourse as they went or singing some becoming

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melody, and ever noting the new flower that opened that hour or the new song of some bird to its nesting mate—the revelation of God to man in the green earth and in the gift to live and to see and to be free upon it.

CHAPTER XVI

OF THREE WHO REMAINED AT LOWBOLE

IT was towards sunset on a fair day that Keren, with Tobiah and Zachary, came to Lowbole. They passed up the path between the trees, last year's leaves deep underfoot, this year's delicately green overhead and all latticed with shafts of sloping light. They came to the house, a silent house in the living woods. There was no smoke from the chimneys, no face at any casement, nothing standing open, neither door nor window, all was closed; damp, stained walls, black and silent, among the trees which pressed close, closer than of old.

"Your father would not seem to have returned," Tobiah said, pausing in the open space before the house.

"No," Keren said. But she did not seem distressed nor greatly surprised not to find him; had he been there, at all events any length of time, she reasoned, he would have sent to Colchester for her. It was not astonishing to find him still away, nor yet alarming; doubtless he would return soon, and, in any case, she was home again. She led the way round to the back of the house.

At the back there were some outbuildings and sheds, all closed or empty, with dead leaves drifted against the doors and moss, induced by the wet, growing upon the thatch of roofs and the flags of paving. Young grass had sprung up between the flags and flowering weeds grown high beside the well. Spring ran riot in the deserted place, daffodils bloomed everywhere, the stooping orchard trees trailed wreaths of blossom upon lush grass, a hundred green things shot or twined on wood pile and shed and old worn brickwork. And everywhere was quiet except

for the manifold voices of birds, singing incessant and quite fearlessly.

"There appears to be no one here," said Tobiah.

"No," Keren said, "my father would have dismissed Giles as well as Joan when he went away and had the house closed. I can get in."

"Where?" asked Tobiah.

"Not there," Keren answered, as he moved towards the door, "that will be strongly fastened on the inner side; I can get in by the panel room."

She led to the further side of the house, where trees were close to the walls; one, a beech not yet full grown, had branches that reached to an upper window.

"Can you get in here?" Tobiah asked doubtfully. It was evident that the window was too narrow for either him or Zachary to go through, even if the branch near could have borne their weight.

"Easily," Keren said; then she turned to Zachary.

"There will be no food in the house," she said, "we must get some. You know the ways and how best to go to the nearest charcoal-burner's hut. I do not know what you could get there, but something, perhaps venison. Say when you enter, 'Is Will within?' and if they say 'Yes, surely, by the fire yonder,' you will know they have it and can purchase cheaply. If they have not that you will still be able to get something. In the meantime I will open the house and light a fire."

Zachary nodded. "We will see you within," he said; "then we will go."

Tobiah was at first inclined to think one of them should remain and be admitted by Keren so soon as she was inside. But Zachary knew, not only that she would have no fear to be here alone, but likely would prefer it.

They helped her into the tree, Tobiah lifting her to Zachary's shoulder, from whence she stepped to the lowest branch. From that she climbed up and to the window very quickly and easily; then, leaning from a precarious place on a bending bough, she broke a window and, slipping in

a hand, unfastened the latch. Then she drew herself to the sill, pushed the window wide and wriggled through the small aperture.

She looked out at them next moment. "You had best go," she said; "you will hardly be back by dark else."

They nodded and departed.

She stood to watch them a moment, then crossed the room and opened the door. It stuck a little, for the room was damp; there was a patch of mildew upon the wall and in the air a clammy smell. She noted it and also noted a leaf which had come down the chimney in some gale of the winter.

Down the passage she went and down the stairs, all thick in dust; her feet made a pattern in the dust, which had been undisturbed these many months. Everywhere was dust and brown twilight and a silence to be felt almost as cold water on a hot day. She unbarred the principal door of the house and set it wide, and then set wide the back one too, letting in the evening breeze and the slanting beams of the setting sun. No sound of man came in, only the whisper of the trees, which seemed very close, and the woods, barred out these months past, seemed to enter in scent and feel and softly rustling sound.

She went from room to room: everywhere there was dust and silence and a sense of quiet waiting, of holding memories of what is gone, secrets of what is done; waiting, maybe the return, maybe for what is yet to befall. She looked into each room; each bore its habitual look, each remembered chair or bed or closet door shut or ajar, all as before; all waiting. She set wide the windows in each room to which she went and left open the doors, so that the breeze, the murmur and scent of trees, seemed to follow after her; shadows swayed noiselessly where she had been and the dust was stirred as by the coming of the earth-life from without. Last she went up to her attic under the roof. There, too, she opened the windows in the thatch, the ones right and left, and the other one by which she had knelt the night when Masterton came the second

time. She opened that last, and coming from it passed by where the mirror hung upon a nail. The surface was dim with dust and damp; she wiped it, and her own face looked out from the ice-like clearness of the glass. The breeze from the three windows moved her hair as she looked at it, even swayed the mirror a little on its nail, as if it, too, as well as the eyes that looked out from it, was alive.

By and by she went downstairs to the kitchen, and there sought tinder-box and wood and set to kindling a fire on the hearth. By twilight she had fires alight in several rooms, the flicker of the flames and the curl of the blue smoke among the twigs joining company with the sound of the trees and the breeze which peopled the quiet house.

By twilight Tobiah and Zachary returned. They brought with them the part of a loaf of black bread, a few eggs of wild duck collected that morning by some children in the swampy bottom of Fairmead or Deadmen's Slade, and a goodly piece of venison. The inquiry, suggested by Keren, when addressed to the owner of the hut, had been answered in the affirmative. "Will"—in life as fine a young buck as ever ran before hound—was discovered in the hole beneath the hearthstone—that "poacher's larder" which custom of the Forest holds inviolate from keeper and ranger alike, so that not one of them touches what is there; nor yet touches the man, however red-handed, who has contrived to get his game there. Zachary, for all his vagabondage, had the feeling of landowners for poachers and poachers' meat; but necessity gave him no choice, so he made the best bargain he could and carried off a good piece of venison. Tobiah, for his part, said nothing against it; he had no feeling for the King's deer; the deer were God's creatures running wild under Heaven, and kings, for the most part, Men of Sin; and if this present new one was not so discovered yet, he was still to be proved, and at best he was a Dutchman and with small right to English beasts on English soil.

Discoursing politically and on the rights of the body

politic and others, they returned together, bringing the provisions with them. At the house they found Keren bending over the fire in the kitchen, a braid of black hair loosened and falling about her dark face as she stooped to the kettle of water she had slung from the hook in the chimney. She took the provisions from them, hearing how they had prospered. Afterwards they set to work to prepare supper, to put beds to fires or spread linen to air. Keren took the direction, showing the quiet and able house-mastery which she must have inherited from some respected wife among the Dee ancestry and which had made her brief time of rule of the vintner's notable.

It was after dark before they sat to table in the tapestry dining-parlour. They had neither candle nor lamp, so they ate by the light of the fire and the rising moon, which shone in at the unshuttered window. Keren sat at the head of the table, Tobiah and Zachary right and left of her. She had brought up a goodly bottle of wine from the cellar, the venison was prime and cooked to a turn; it was a pleasing meal and they good company who sat to it. The evening was fit to rank with the best of those of their journey; nay, it was the best of them, and the talk the best and the most tending to edification and to wit, the perfection and crown of what had gone before, as a journey's end should be. A very notable evening, both at table and about the fire afterwards.

On the morrow Keren set forth to seek Giles. Zachary and Tobiah went with her; both were minded to question him. There were little seeking, really; Keren led to his mother's cot in a hamlet some four miles distant through the thick of the Forest; there he was discovered, and there they conversed with him.

"I am come home," Keren said, somewhat as if she had been gone a week and her return were the thing most to be looked for.

Certainly Giles did not seem to find it otherwise; he had served Dr. Ashe some while, and did not look upon his doings, and by consequence his daughter's, as things to be

measured by any rule he knew, or to be considered upon one way or the other.

"I am come home," Keren said, "and I would that you return to the Grange. I think, perhaps, it were well if your mother were to come too; Joan is not here and you would be but unhandy with the cooking."

"Yes," said Giles, and called "Mother!"

The old woman came, and Keren spoke with her, while Zachary and Tobiah began to question Giles as to Ashe, when he went away, what his whereabouts and likely time of return.

Concerning the first Giles could answer more or less. Dr. Ashe had gone away between All Souls' and Christmas—a space of time covering nearly seven weeks; but he did not get nearer, being one who dated by festivals. Concerning the other questions, he could not get so near, indeed, he could tell nothing at all. Dr. Ashe had not said where he was going, he never did; Giles had not asked him, nor thought about it, he never did either. As for return, nothing had been said; the doctor would come back on a day, no doubt Giles would know then—if he was bidden back to employ. Beyond that he could tell nothing; rather, seemed surprised and a little perplexed that any should ask. A deal more surprised and less perplexed than that Keren should reappear and bid him to Lowbole.

"This doing of Ashe is strange," Tobiah said to Zachary, "and also like to place us in some difficulty."

"Yes," said Zachary, but he did not sound as if he found it a matter for much distress.

"Has the man ever gone thus before?" Tobiah asked.

"Why, certainly," Zachary answered; "it is always thus he goes, when he goes, which is but seldom, I own; telling no one anything of his business or when he will return."

"You have no knowledge where he went, nor why?"

"On former occasions? Oh, yes, some of them; sometimes he afterward spoke to me of it; or those who met him chanced to tell me after. There was nothing secret about the journeys, they were always on some concern of

his Art, sometimes undertaken to procure materials or utensils, sometimes to confer with brother alchemists; and they were to various places, naturally, according to where the thing or the knowledge was to be found."

"H'm!" said Tobiah, "and this one?"

"Doubtless it is as the others; but as to where taken, or in pursuit of what matter of learning, I cannot say, until he is returned and tells me of it."

"That is useless," Tobiah said, frowning.

Zachary agreed, but did not frown, although he admitted that the present journey had engaged Ashe much longer than any previous one. "That puzzles me a little," he said; "but one supposes he himself looked for it to take long, else he would not have shut the house, dismissed his servants and bade Keren remain in Colchester."

"Yes," Tobiah said, stroking his chin, "that may be so, it has the look. But seeing the maid has not remained in Colchester, the question arises: what is to be done with her?"

"That arranges itself," Zachary said. "She remains here to wait her father's return."

Tobiah was not perfectly satisfied; but as Zachary pointed out, there was nothing else to be done, and small likelihood it would be for very long, Ashe being likely to return any day now. Zachary's next words pleased him more.

"If you desire it," he said, "I will question Giles when he comes to the Grange, and discover if I can what the Master worked upon last before he went away. It may be possible from that to get some idea upon what quest he is gone, and so perhaps, since I know something of the Art and the whereabouts of its greatest students, where he has gone."

Tobiah approved this suggestion, and, in the light of it, was content to say no more on the question of what were best to be done in Ashe's absence—more especially as he did not as yet perceive what were best, or if anything better than awaiting him here.

That evening Zachary questioned Giles. They were in

the stone room at the time; Keren, during the day, had found the key and unlocked the door. She and Zachary spent some while there in the afternoon; but he discovered nothing pertinent to the question which perplexed him. All within the room was as usual; some broken vessels upon benches, set aside ready for repairing when the repairer (Zachary) should come again; a furnace or two burnt out or choked with dust; a few flasks empty upon a side table; nothing else that was not perfectly orderly, waiting, like the house, the return of the presiding spirit. There was one spot towards which Zachary had glanced at once, though without letting Keren know it; that was the high ledge where three small bottles had been placed a year ago. Two of them still stood there, the one which was called a love philtre was gone, but the other two, marked *Ultio*, were there. He had told himself they would be, that there was no chance Ashe's journey was to Reutzberg to take one of them. Even if the earlier suspicion, too terrible and too grotesque to be true, but which occurred none the less, even if there had been some grounds for it, there was no likelihood that Ashe had taken a bottle to the town now. Reutzberg had paid a price, an awful price, rightly named "revenge" for what had befallen years ago. Though one, Schleger, had escaped, Ashe would not go there to carry *Ultio*. Certainly, if the suspicion had foundations and there was in the stuff a death which could be sent to smite sure and unseen, there was no need for him to carry it himself. At all events, he had not, the bottles were still on the ledge; Zachary satisfied himself as to that when he and Keren first went to the stone room. Afterwards he looked round for some sign of what the master had last worked upon. But of that he found nothing.

As it happened, however, Giles could tell them what Ashe had last done, for an accident had occurred which impressed him. When Zachary mentioned a name it recalled it to him.

"The Ethereal Spirit," Zachary asked, "did the doctor accomplish it before he went away?"

"That he did!" Giles cried; "and a mighty spirit it was, too! It nigh choked him the first time he had traffic with it!"

"Was there an explosion?" Zachary asked.

Giles shook his head. "No," he said, "I'd 'a' heard that an there was—I was but in the kitchen brewing somewhat to his orders. I heard nothing, it was as quiet as the grave, and kep' on being after the brewing was done and me waiting word to take the stuff to the room. At last I did take it without word, and there I found him lying out on the floor—just as it might be where you stand, sir."

"Was he much hurt?" Keren asked.

"Not a scratch on him, mistress," Giles answered, "and he never felt nothing after, only as it might be a bit vomit-some and mazey when he first came to. It was just as if he was asleep, sound asleep, sounder than any man in liquor even. A job I had to wake him. I couldn't so to say do it till the fumes of the spirit had passed off."

Keren recalled the drowsy, stupefying sense which had begun to creep to her own brain on the day of the explosion.

"Was there a strange sweet smell in the air?" she asked.

"Like marjoram," Giles answered, "but heady, as if one had drunk strong waters."

"*The Spiritus Vini Æthereus!*" Zachary said.

Giles nodded. "So the Master said; but no spirit was there to see, nor *vini*, nor nothing, all the bottles and flasks and things were quite empty. Because why? The Spirit had got out! It was so strong that so soon as it was made to come it had got out! Not that the master was put about by that—he's a great doctor, he knows how to bind a spirit! So soon as he was himself, he went to work to make it again; it took a great while, but he did it, and he was ready for it that time when it came; he bound it and put it in a bottle. It didn't look so different from pump water when there, only it had the sweet smell."

"And then?" Tobiah asked, when Giles stopped, evidently full of pride in his master's skill. "What befell then?"

Nothing had befallen then, the man's pride was for that. "That was the end," Zachary explained. "Dr. Ashe had achieved the *Spiritus Vini Æthereus*, the first time in the history of man that it had been perfectly accomplished. It was the end; when one has achieved there is no more."

"But to what purpose?" Tobiah demanded.

They could not tell him, neither Keren nor Zachary, it was a question which had no answer, no more than if it were asked "of what sound is the sun," or if one "preferred the third proposition of Euclid sweet or sour."

Giles, however, brightened suddenly. "The master went away soon after," he said; "that's what befell then."

"Oh!" said Tobiah. "On account of this Spiritus?"

Giles could not tell; but Zachary and Keren said "No." If this were the last work upon which the Master was engaged it offered no clue to where he had gone or why. Having accomplished he would have no need to go for material or conference in connection with it; and to exhibit it were the last thing he would think to do. It was not for that he had gone, that seemed certain.

But for what had he? Or, rather, where had he?

Tobiah put the question again when he and Zachary were alone.

"We are no nearer that," Zachary was obliged to admit; "and, as I said before, I don't expect we shall be until he returns to tell us."

"But in the meantime—" began Tobiah.

"In the meantime we stay here," Zachary told him. "Nay, observe, there is nothing else to be done. Keren, as you perceive, thinks to stay, and I for one, and you for another, have no other place to suggest for her. For you—you have to abide somewhere from Colchester for a time; this should suit well enough; it is very remote, and there are ungodly within a day's walk, or less; the Forest folk are very heathen, some of them, bad enough to employ all your ministrations."

This was true. Tobiah had seen the darkness of the scattered Forest folk when here last year, and again this

in the short time had been here—the charcoal-burner before cutting up the deer yesterday had signed the carcass with a cross, and Giles before closing the house for the night made strange marks across the door stones, the same his ancestors had always made to propitiate the Forest gods—or the bog-garts, as he now called them. There was certainly need for ministration here, and in the unvirtuous lives which, without doubt, were led in such darkness. Tobiah saw that the Lord might well have work for him in this remote spot.

"But you, sir," he said, "you are not called—you have nothing here."

"I shall find plenty," Zachary answered. "I shall repair all the implements and vessels in the stone room which stand in need of it; there are enough to employ me a while and to enable me to earn board—which, I warn you, is likely to be of the plainest, for though Keren will know and touch her father's hidden store of money, she will, without doubt, find it small and use it sparingly, and you and I have no great sum to add to it."

"H'm!" said Tobiah; but he did not see that Zachary was called to remain.

"You have affairs of your own to attend to," he said, "and were better attending them. If you truly are upon the world with no other sustenance than you may earn, it were well—but the commonest sense—to set about sober employ for the gaining of daily bread."

"You are right," Zachary agreed; "but, dear sir, I have not the commonest sense. Though in that I am not singular, there are others that have not—those of old, called the Sons of the Prophets, to whom it was promised they should not want for a drink of water or a morsel of bread. The Sons of the Prophets never want for that plain fare; nor do any followers of the Dream or the Idea—provided they have faith to follow and contentment with the plainness; if they have not, they are not truly of the band and do not deserve other than they desire, to eat swine's flesh upon the common earth, or even to eat acorns with the swine and be grudgingly satisfied with their low estate."

"That is as it may be," said Tobiah, "and doubtless you have in sorts the warranty of Scripture; but the Sons of the Prophets, I would remind you, were not ordinary men ordinarily placed; they were not wed."

"Nor am I."

"You should be," Tobiah said.

"What!" Zachary cried. "I understood that you held a poor opinion of the married state!"

"In cases yes, in more cases than not; but not in all. There are those who do well to settle and wed, who should, instead of wandering the country, be established in their lot, fulfilling the duties of citizens, begetting children—"

Zachary made a grimace. "I have no leaning that way," he said; "on the doubtful business of the begetting of children see one, Erasmus, his *Praise of Folly*."

"I do not go to see nor hear any in praise of folly," Tobiah retorted, "though I can well believe that you may do so. At time you show a lightness of mind the more lamentable seeing your other parts, which are good. For this reason, among others, I hold it might be well were you soberly wedded; I would have you embrace a wife."

"I have no desire for any woman's embraces," Zachary declared, "nor, indeed, have ever felt any. I would be excused."

Nevertheless Tobiah held to his opinion. "You have a duty," he said, "you have an inheritance."

At that Zachary laughed. "The liberty of man!" he said; "that I inherit, and the freedom of open Heaven, which you would proscribe by bidding me hence to harness in daily toil for daily bread and a stewardship of the commonplace. What inheritance, other than this which you would take, have I?"

"There is this matter of Wythes Hall—" Tobiah began.

"Ah, Wythes Hall!" Zachary said, as one reminded. "That is a subject on which I would fain take opinion, that and Nahum's message and what, he thinks, may be learned in London or elsewhere; I would hear what you think were best to be done?"

That was easy, Tobiah was very ready to speak thereon; though, as he said, he was not as yet fully resolved, not having heard Zachary with the fullness he could desire. "It might perhaps be as well to repair to London before setting upon work elsewhere," he said; "it is but a short journey hence."

"It is," Zachary agreed. "I have considered upon it myself, but am not determined. I would have your advice—to-morrow. It is a matter in which I feel it were well to go warily; I would discourse with you upon it and consider it carefully—at leisure. Fortunately there is no need for hasty doing; we can take our time while we wait the return of Dr. Ashe. And I can depart from here upon the business on any day that is convenient, seeing the journey is so short to London."

Tobiah's advice was at the service of any man who asked it, and some who did not. He would have been willing, although the hour was late, to enter upon discussion of the subject then and there. But Zachary was in favour of to-morrow, saying he was a-weary to-night; too weary for a thing such as this, which demanded one's best wits; so it was put off.

But on the morrow no conclusion was reached; nor on the morrow after that, nor the next, nor the next. It was wonderful what a deal Zachary had to ask and to tell; what doubts he discovered, what objections raised, and what stories of the past were recalled to him and retold by him in the course of the discourse; not to mention questions of doctrine and principle which the consideration seemed to involve or to lead to. It should also be said that Tobiah, finding himself called to ministration among the far scattered Forest folk, had not the greatest leisure to give to the other matter. Zachary said the day was the only time for a man to go abroad in that country, if he did not desire to lose himself entirely. Thus it was of an evening only that Tobiah was free to devote himself to the consideration of Zachary's matter; and of an evening it often happened Zachary had that to do, either in repairing im-

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plements or working at some operation with Keren, which prevented talk. Still, as he said, it was not greatly inconvenient; there would, doubtless, be opportunity to consider it thoroughly before Doctor Ashe returned.

The which seemed likely enough, for days passed and Ashe did not come.

But in the course of time another did—two others. This was towards the end of the month.

Riding to the door one afternoon came two horsemen, unhappy in their seats—though the more unhappy of the two was so unhappy in mind as to give little heed to matters of the body. The two were William Senlac, factotum to the Russia merchant, and Simon Shipp, the vintner.

Keren and Zachary were in the stone room busy upon the operation of the blue stone, which she was most desirous to repeat with a perfection she had not achieved in Colchester. But though she was deep in the work, she heard the sound of hoofs betimes and went to a window from which she could take an observation unseen.

"Simon Shipp comes," she reported.

"Go!" Zachary commanded, though there was small need, for even as he spoke she went.

She slipped out at the back, staying only to send Giles upon an errand which would take him forth for at least an hour. After that she took to the Forest and was no more seen—and would have been about as easy to find there as some particular rabbit or stoat.

Zachary, in the meanwhile, went to the door and opened as the riders drew rein.

"Is Master Ashe within?" Simon asked; "Master Ashe, the learned doctor?"

"No," Zachary answered, and, with the polite regret of a stranger that one should have had his trouble for nothing, he explained that the doctor was still from home and, so far as was known, likely to be.

Simon's face did not fall, it was already as long as human face could be; indeed, if anything, it showed slight relief at news of Ashe's absence.

Zachary invited him to dismount: he invited both to dismount, himself taking the horses and fetching refreshment.

"There is but a clown and an old woman to serve the house," he explained, "and the one is out and the other not to be found. I am in no state here, as you perceive; I do but hold the place till Dr. Ashe's return."

"Yes," Simon said, "yes. You are a friend of Dr. Ashe, a pupil—an assistant?"

Zachary claimed the honour of being all three, and Shipp nodded, nervously sipping the wine set before him—a poor vintage.

"You have business with Dr. Ashe?" Zachary inquired, when he seemed to find nothing to say. "Is it aught in which I can be of service?"

"Yes—no!" Simon answered jerkily. "At least—it concerns his daughter."

"His daughter? Mistress Keren-Happuch? She went to abide with a worthy relative of the doctor, I heard—Simon Shipp, the respected vintner in Colchester. You do not, by any chance, come with a message from him?"

"I am he," said Simon, in a tone of dejection sad to hear in one claiming that respected name. And though Zachary showed a fine respect—admiration, almost one might say—for the announcement, the honest tradesman did not brighten.

"You bring word from Mistress Keren-Happuch, perhaps?" Zachary suggested. "I trust that she is well?"

"She—" Simon began, and stopped.

Then he tried again; the thing had to be said; to say it he had made the journey to London and from London here.

"The girl," he got out at length, "is not in Colchester. She has—she has gone."

"Gone! Gone where? Gone how?"

"Yes, gone," the vintner repeated; "gone away."

Then he roused himself. "I had hope," he said, though without life in his tone, "at least, I had not—we thought, as a last chance, though 'tis not one really, that she might by some strange happening have come here."

Zachary shook his head. "She is not here," he said; and it was true, since she was out in the woods. Had he been asked, he could have truly said he did not know where she was, for he could not have come on her much more easily than the vintner's self.

But he was not asked; it was not Simon who put questions now, but he. And he showed amazement at what he heard, amazement and consternation too, in the proper order and degree.

The tale, as told by Simon, consisted chiefly of negative. The girl was not in Colchester, she was not in the house of any relative or friend of her own or the Shipps, even Joan at Maldon had been inquired of. She had not eloped with a lover, or been carried off by a gallant of high or low degree. She had not, either, gone away in a pet or from wilfulness—perhaps under some—some misapprehension. Yes, perhaps under that, some misapprehension and suspicion.

Zachary inquired into that misapprehension and suspicion. And got a clearish idea of what had happened, both before Keren left Colchester, which he knew already, and also of that which he did not know, what had happened after, when Betsy Shipp returned and set her house in order with her besom of common sense and the full exercise of a long tongue and a warm heart, both set hotly going on behalf of the motherless girl left to her charge and lost from home by her husband and the spinster Rachel.

But in return for all that Simon told he got no satisfaction at all. It is to be feared, rather, that Zachary made the situation look its worst and painted darkly the vintner's responsibility and Ashe's feelings when he should come to hear what had befallen.

And if he was unfairly hard on the poor man, seeing how he could have relieved him, it must be said for him that he had reason to know to what such a suspicion as that aroused against Keren could lead, with or without the active co-operation of those who had first aroused it; and a more than common reason for remembering it here.

The vintner did not stand up to the blows, deftly rather than heavily, dealt him; he, as we know, was always ready to fear and foresee the worst; that another should paint the situation and the future in sad colours was not likely to provoke him to resentment, still less to hope. He agreed with the worst that Zachary could say, and only differed from him when he thought that he included Betsy in blame. She was away at the time, Simon said—she ought never to have gone (one wonders when a housewife ought according to the master of the house); but beyond that not a word did he allow against her. He even took blame to himself when by so doing he exonerated her.

Zachary warmed to him a little for that and after let him off more gently, even lending a not all unsympathetic ear when Simon explained that he and his sister meant no harm to the girl; that they had not thought all this distress would arise from their act and speech.

"Ah!" Zachary said, "that is the ruthless way of Fate; she takes small account of what a man means, only of what he does. It is nothing to her if he never thought of a conflagration when he left embers among the straw, or of flood when he set the sluice gates ajar; she deals in what is, not what might be or was thought or intended to be."

"But I don't think I'm all to blame," the vintner complained. (It is possible that Mistress Shipp in her first warmth had held that he was.)

"Oh, no," Zachary agreed; but also said: "Fate does not blame, she pays. God and man deal in blame—and the One we hope's merciful and the other we know is so sometimes; but Fate and Nature—no! 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' a conflagration for an ember and a rod for the back of fools—not, meaning you, of course, sir."

He pressed more wine upon the vintner, which the poor man took, though he did not like it. Afterwards he began to ask where they had searched for the missing girl, and what had been done.

"We have done all we can," Simon said, "searched near and far—farther than any one, more especially a maid most

ill-provided with money, could have gone. We inquired first along the road by which one would leave Colchester to set out for here—it was because we had inquired upon it and heard nothing that it was with no hope of finding her here that I asked you of her. We heard no word of her upon that road; no, even though some on our behalf made inquiry so far as Chelmsford. She had not been seen or heard of upon that way! she clearly did not take it. We have inquired elsewhere—everywhere; we have inquired on all likely and unlikely roads and in all likely and unlikely spots for a far greater distance than she could ever have gone.”

“And you learned nothing?”

“Nothing! One report only described a girl at all like her—she was of a somewhat uncommon appearance, you may know, sir, though not fair. But it could not have been she, for it came from the lonely country between Earl’s Colne and Gosfield, nearer to the last than the first, a very remote spot, where there are no highways and where there is no likelihood she could find her way or have any reason to go. Moreover, this girl was described to be with two vagabond fellows, singing drunkenly as they went. And Keren, we are sure, went alone; and being of a solitary and unfriendly sort, would not have picked up with any by the way; certainly not such, coming, as she did, from a good house.”

He swelled a little at the last with conscious pride of substantial respectability, and Zachary said: “Certainly not, most certainly not; Mistress Ashe would, I am sure, never demean herself to low company.”

Then he asked what the vintner was purposed next to do.

That was precisely what the vintner did not know. He and Betsy had done all they could, and at last in despair decided the news must be given to Ashe; or at least it was their duty to see if he were at Lowbole, or likely soon to be, to receive it.

“Well,” Zachary said, when he learnt this, “as I have already said, the doctor is now from home and I do not know either when he will return or where he is gone; those

are things which he does not say when he goes away. But I expect to remain here till he does come and, I conclude, you would desire me to break this news to him then, unless there is better before?"

Simon said "Yes, that was so," and appeared relieved to have one undertake the task.

"In the meantime," Zachary further offered, "I will make what inquiries I may among places and persons that are known to the father and daughter, in case she should have reached any of them."

"Yes, yes—if you know of any," the vintner said eagerly. "Can you name any?"

"I can't call one to mind just now," Zachary admitted; "they were solitary people with few or no friends and she, at least, no traveller. But maybe I shall recall. I will try; you may rely on me to do what I can to find her. I have been about the country much, I know folk here and there, and may hear something of her; she must be, as you have said, somewhere; and if somewhere, then somewhere to be found!"

"Yes," the vintner said, "yes!"

He was a little encouraged by Zachary's sympathetic demeanour; though Betsy afterwards dashed the encouragement by reminding him that the missing girl was not that man's daughter—and what would an apprentice, even Jackman, who was superior to the common sort, care for the loss of his master's daughter as compared to the sorrow her own father felt? At the time, however, this view did not present itself to Simon, and the fact that he had escaped breaking the news to the father did.

Relieved, at least, as to that, though no happier with regard to the girl herself, he took his departure.

Zachary walked some little way with him and Senlac, they going at a foot pace—which really suited them best—to accommodate him. He said he would put them upon a clear track, from whence they could not miss the way to the London Road (and so need not have speech with any if, as was unlikely, they had the fortune to meet them. Simon was

grateful for this guidance, for though they had got there without misadventure, Senlac remembering the way from the former journey, there was no certainty that they would get back so well. After half an hour's walking they parted where the track was widish and the way clear, Zachary returning to Lowbole and Simon going on, in deep depression again at thought of his wife, to whom he had no news to bring.

It was the thought of the wife that pleased Tobiah when, on his return that evening, he learned what had befallen and heard a full account of what Simon had said.

"I see signs of a chastened spirit," he said; "I see repentance for folly, or, at all events, for the consequences thereof, which may be the beginning of amendment, or is as much as is to be looked for at the beginning in some. Mistress Betsy Shipp will have wrought with her husband and sister in the matter—I do not know, if I could not be there to do it myself, that there is any I would sooner have upon the task. She is a worthy woman and capable."

"I hope," Zachary said with admiration, "that some time I may have the honour to make her acquaintance; it were honour, indeed, to meet with one who, although of the weak sex, you can regard as a passable vice-admonisher in such—or any—case."

"I am sorry she should be distressed on my account," Keren said; "she was ever kind to me. I am sorry she should be troubled."

"It were easy to set her at rest," Zachary told her; "in a while I will write a letter to Simon to say that I have had news of you; that I hear you are safe and well in the company of a worthy minister and good people—Giles and his old mother may pass for that, even if modesty forbids me to so describe myself—I will say that I know for a fact this is so, for I have seen you, though I have undertaken not to reveal in what locality till Dr. Ashe returns. Such a letter should ease Mistress Shipp and leave you safe and unmolested."

"Yes!" Keren said, pleased with the idea.

But Tobiah was not so satisfied. "I see small reason why you should not return to the vintner's," he said.

Keren saw great. "I do not want to," she said; "I remain here."

Such a reason naturally did not weigh with Tobiah, but one of Zachary's providing did. "The suspicion of witchcraft has died in the Shipps," he said; "that seems truly so, driven out by Mistress Betsy and realisation of what mischief they may have done. But we have no guarantee that it is extinct in Calderbeck, and those to whom it may have been communicated. We have evidence, from the experience of others, that such things are a deal easier to kindle than to extinguish. I would not take the risk of return; at all events, not until after you, sir, have been able to go to Colchester and deal with folk there."

Tobiah admitted there was something in this. "They are an evil seed," he said, "Calderbeck and his brood; and the rest a fat-witted yet withal headstrong foolish generation."

Later, however, he spoke of the suspicion of the fat-wits. "Concerning this matter," he said, "there is something to be said for the side which is not the maid's."

"What!" Zachary cried. "Do you hold her in any sorts guilty?"

"Not of witchcraft," Tobiah said. "Witches there are, doubtless, we have the warranty of Scripture for that; but I do not hold them of common occurrence, any more than I reckon it common that angels should appear to men and speak, eat and drink with them. Neither the one nor the other are a fruit that grows on every bush. Every maid that quarrels with another maid and abuses her is not in league with the Devil, even though the other's lover afterwards leaves her. And every old wife that bickers with her neighbour, and wishes ill-luck to her onion bed has not bewitched it, even though the crop fail. The Devil has something more to do than to concern himself with such trifles and the doings of such journeyman's work; the ordinary and common wickedness of the human heart is enough to

account for most ills, without witchcraft. Nay, I hold the smelling out of witches and the prosecuting of them to be a lively opportunity for error, often embraced. The Church has ever been a persecutrix, and men of Calderbeck's kidney have ever been great smellers out. They may not always err, but they doubtless most usually do—except by the direct interposition of God."

"Your sentiments," said Zachary, "are an honour to you, and your opinions those that are held by many of the learned."

"That is as may be," Tobiah answered, unflattered. "Nevertheless, I hold in the case of Mistress Keren-hap-puch that there is something, although not witchcraft, against her, and something to be said for the other side. I have never known a case in which there was not something against the victim, even of injustice or tyranny; most usually something of aggravation, impudence, meddlesomeness or stupidity—which, though it does not justify the persecution, yet removes the other from the position of lamb at the slaughter."

Zachary laughed. "I own," said he, "that it might take a deal of sheep's clothing to get Mistress Keren mistaken for a lamb; and if the slaughter, to which she was taken, was graced by the presence of the vintner's niece, Kate, the mistake might be corrected and the sheep's clothing thrown off."

"Precisely," said Tobiah. "Clearly she did not love this Kate, nor seek to have her love, the which is not Christian. Also, it is clear she has qualities of an uncommon sort—I do not say good or bad, though certainly useless—and these she neither concealed, as modesty would dictate, nor yet used in any beneficial way. These things are counts against her. Concerning the folly of the blue stone, I do not hold that other than foolish, or worse than many of the silly doings of maids; but the manner in which she behaved when discovered by Simon Shipp and his sister—"

"Was mad," Zachary allowed. "Yet one knows how it came about, if one knows her; and I am not sure that the

madness, if such it was, did not save her; at all events, give her time and chance to escape."

Tobiah did not think so; but the argument was carried no further, for Zachary bethought him to tell the Dissenter how Simon Shipp had spoken of him.

"Of me?" said Tobiah.

"Yes," Zachary replied; "he said a young woman, answering to the description of Keren, was seen in the lonely country between Earl's Colne and Gosfield with two vagabond fellows, who were singing drunkenly as they went."

"Sir!" cried Tobiah.

Zachary nodded sympathetically. "I feel it too," he said. "Vagabond fellows one could pass—my coat is not of the newest and maybe you carried yours upon your arm at the time, you sometimes did to save it—but drunken! Our music drunken! Truly is it said the English is an unmusical nation!"

"There is a mistake!" Tobiah declared.

"So the vintner held," Zachary told him, "and I did not offer correction, seeing he was happier so holding—and so are we. Still, it cuts, it cuts, I allow it; the music was good music."

"For music I care nothing," said Tobiah; "but for truth, much. I shall speak with Shipp when I return to Colchester and learn from him who was his informant."

"Do," Zachary said; "and when found I will sing to him all my songs and you shall sing all the choruses till, willy-nilly, he shall be convinced two soberer men and better musicians never stepped the highway. Shall we to bed?"

"You take the matter foolishly," Tobiah said severely.

"Vagabond fellows! Drunken fellows!" he rose as he spoke, for Zachary had taken up the light. "Give me but to speak with the man!"

After that they went to bed.

And afterwards, on the next day, and the next and others after, things befell as before. Tobiah concerned himself, as befitted a servant of the Lord, with the dark souls that dwelt here and there in the Forest, rebuking, instructing,

catechising; converting some, christening some and marrying some one or two. The last may not have been quite regular, but it was better than no marriage, and the worthy man, we may be sure, did not transgress the law more than necessary. Nor, we may equally be sure, did he spare himself either in opening the Word to those of the household or in going abroad—very far abroad—to do it. The tradition of him and his ministry still lingers in those parts, the tradition of a man mighty in word and deed, of tongue and feet.

The other two were occupied nearer at hand. Keren directed the household, where Giles fetched water, carried wood and swept the rooms, ever standing open to the air, and his old mother served. An old, old woman, she, with poor eyesight and less hearing; but still able to do as she had always done, bake the bread, boil the pot or wash the linen by the well, as an old horse can do what he has been used to do when it is far beyond him to learn a thing which is simpler but new. These two Keren directed, and for the rest spent long days in the stone room at work upon some operation of her father's Art, or else watching or assisting Zachary as he repaired what was broken with blow-pipe or soldering iron; or else forth in the woods, which were both friends and home to her and now most exceeding fair; for the leaves were between green and gold, a living colour, and the season between spring and summer, the bridal of the year.

Thus the three abode at Lowbole, and no one from the outside world came to disturb them there. No tidings reached them, neither of peace nor war nor matters political; nor yet of Ashe nor the Shipps and matters personal. It was as if they were forgotten and had forgot in this house, which was as an island set in a sea of trees; and which was so full of the breath of the Forest and so close to it that it was no wonder to see the frogs upon the doorstep at twilight or the rabbits pausing to look in.

CHAPTER XVII

OF THE GOING OF THREE FROM LOWBOLE

ON an evening towards the end of June, Keren opened a drawer in the stone room. It was a drawer which had not been opened since the return to Lowbole, a small one in a chest in the far corner. She had prepared some flowers of sulphur for an operation she thought to do on the morrow, and she desired to put them for the night where they would be safe from dust. The drawer, which was one Ashe seldom used, stuck somewhat, fitting very close; then it gave with a little sound as the long imprisoned air came out.

As it did so Keren stood arrested. Then she bent quickly over the drawer, which was empty except for some few fragments of paper.

"The smell?" she queried, bending close. "The smell—" She stooped closer, breathing deep, half questing, half puzzled. Then suddenly she straightened: "The smell of the Town!" she said, startled.

"What is this? What is this?" cried Tobiah.

She did not answer, but stood staring into the drawer with darkening eyes.

"What town?" Zachary asked.

For a moment she did not answer him either, hardly seeming to perceive that he had spoken. He did not repeat the question but waited, and in a little she spoke: "The town in the dream," she said. "You do not know, I have never told you; I have a dream of a town sometimes, or else I remember it from very long ago. It seemed a dream, but sometimes I thought it must have been real because of the smell; I remembered the smell of it so that

I knew I should know it at once did I ever meet it. And this is it; it is here."

Tobiah would have risen and gone to see what she had, but Zachary silently entreated him back.

"What is the town like?" he asked.

Keren, who was still gazing in the drawer, looked up and away as if summoning a vision. "The houses are dark-coloured and many-pointed; they have steep roofs," she said slowly. "It is cold there, very cold; always the snow falls on windows that are never opened.

"The people are thick-shaped and talk in their throats; I do not know what they say. They never let one go out. The rooms are dark, and there is this smell; I think the smell is in the presses."

"Yes," Zachary said, and with a hand behind him pressed on Tobiah's knee to request silence. "Is the smell in the drawer, do you say?"

"The drawer or the paper within it. It is the paper perhaps."

She gathered the fragments, touching them delicately and as little as possible, so as not to destroy the scent.

"It is part of a letter," she said. "Perhaps it comes from the Town?"

"Perhaps," Zachary said, and came to look at the pieces.

They were but few and not all of them written upon; they appeared to be some part of a letter torn up, and, no doubt, preserved by accident when the rest was destroyed. The writing upon them told nothing; it was but sentences of formal courtesy and greetings such as might open any letter to any person from any person on any matter. They gave no clue to the writer, the receiver, nor the business with which the main—and missing—part of the letter had been concerned. Upon one fragment, however, there was a date, a day in November; it caught Keren's eye.

"That would have been not long before my father went away," she said.

She looked at it a minute. "Do you think he can have

gone to the Town?" she asked; her tone was very grave, almost as if there was something ominous in the idea.

Tobiah had risen, content with silence no longer. "Seeing the date," he said, looking over her shoulder at the paper, "it is quite reasonable to conclude your father may have gone on a business concerning which this letter was written, or even to the place from whence it came; but unless we can discover where that is, we are not enlightened."

Zachary drew nearer. "Perhaps I can tell," he said; "I know many towns in this country and others, most of those that Dr. Ashe is likely to go to or to correspond with; maybe I can discover this."

She moved back a little; she had put the pieces of paper upon a table and now moved so that he might come near. He did so, stooping over them, Tobiah doing likewise.

"There is no smell here," the Dissenter said.

She did not answer; her eyes were on Zachary.

"I find something," he said. "Faint—very faint; but familiar in a sort. I have smelt it before, somewhere. Where?" He stooped again, but in a little straightened himself as one undecided. "Let me have till to-morrow to think," he said.

"You will remember?" she asked.

"Perhaps," he said, "perhaps not; one can't be sure."

He gathered the fragments and, putting them back in the drawer, shut it. "Leave them here till to-morrow," he said, "perhaps by then—"

"Chut!" said Tobiah. "Folly! 'Tis all folly! One would think you held there to be magic in those pieces!"

The others, however, gave him but little heed. They listened to what he might say with politeness but not truly with any attention. They spoke, instead, of the dream which the scent had recalled to Keren; she telling of it and how it sometimes recurred to her, as she had told Masterton more than a year ago.

Before very long she went to bed.

Zachary escorted her to the foot of the stairs, carrying

the candle for her through the long passage and the draughty dining-parlour. Tobiah, remaining behind in the stone room, heard their voices in talk; Zachary had insensibly led the talk to lighter things before Keren bade good-night. The Dissenter frowned a little as he heard them; he did not all approve this attentiveness on Zachary's part; he had it in his mind to speak with him on the matter when he returned.

But he did not, for the man who came back was other than the man who had gone forth, one upon whose face perplexity and anxiety sat.

"How now?" he said. "What is this?"

"I would that I knew," Zachary answered.

"What!" Tobiah cried. "Do you regard this girlish whimsy of a fancy town and a phantom smell as serious?"

He was scornful of it himself. He pulled open the drawer again and, after sniffing at the contents, examined them once more. "I find no scent there," he said; "no more than place of direction or word of business."

"There is a very faint odour of woodruff," Zachary told him. "It is likely you will not have met the herb or known the smell, and so do not perceive it; I doubt I had had I not smelt it before and also had an idea for what to look. That Keren did, I grant you, seems wonderful; but she has keener senses than the most of us, or perhaps a better memory, and perception to recognise and apply what they tell her."

Tobiah stared into the drawer. "You hold there is the odour of an herb here?" he said, applying one of the fragments of paper to his nose.—"That she was right in perceiving it?" He tried to perceive it for himself, but failed, not knowing the scent. "If it is what you say, and you know it, why did you not tell her? Why did you make this mystery?"

"If the only mystery were the trifle of my making I should be glad enough," Zachary said.

"No matter is enlightened by adding further obscurity

to it," Tobiah observed. "You should have spoken the truth simply and to the point to the girl."

Zachary did not answer; he was clearly a good deal perplexed and turning the business in his mind. Tobiah began to ask what the herb was and for what used.

At that Zachary roused himself. "Housewives in some parts of Europe put the leaves in their presses," he said; "some hold it scents linen, some that it keeps out moth; some use it so much that every drawer and cupboard smells of it, and the whole room, too, in the winter when the windows are shut to keep out the cold."

Tobiah recalled Keren's words about the cold in the Town of the dream and the windows that were closed. "Do you hold there to be foundation for what the maid described?" he asked.

"She described a town from which she was carried when she was three years old," Zachary answered. "One of which no one has ever spoken to her and of which—the place, the happenings there and the carrying away—I believed she had no more knowledge than we have of the time before we come into this world—of the existence of which she is, you perceive, not much more sure."

His tone was so grave that for a moment Tobiah caught the infection of it; but the feeling quickly passed.

"What harm that she should remember—if she does?" he asked. "For my part I see no special remembering here; she described no building, no landmark, no town-hall or gallows or kindred thing to be recognised; her words would fit many places and yet more fancies."

"They fit this one at that time and no other," Zachary said, "for they give the feel of it, above all the feeling that would have been about her then. It is that which the scent brings back to her, that, with the dim light and the dark colour and the cold."

He took up a fragment of paper and put it down again, without noting what he did, listening the while, without heeding, to what Tobiah said. At last he roused himself. "My friend," he said, as one who makes up his mind, "I

will tell you the truth. In the town of which we speak Keren's mother was tried for witchcraft."

"Witchcraft!" Tobiah cried.

Zachary nodded. "Yes," he said; "but you will, if you please, always observe complete silence about it. Keren knows nothing of it, her memory does not reach back to it, she was but eighteen months at the time; she has never heard word of it."

"This is a strange and terrible thing," Tobiah said. "The mother tried for witchcraft and—"

"And the daughter suspected, perhaps you would say," Zachary concluded for him. "It was because of the mother that the news of the suspicion against the daughter moved me as it did; I knew to what such suspicion can lead. Oh, it was that, I can tell you, no fear that it was true, or that there was reason to believe in the one case any more than the other. Some of the same evidence would be brought against both, for they have some of the same gifts and ways. Eyes that watch and compel, hands that handle delicately and masterly too, the power of the wild creatures, to which they are akin, to hear and tell steps, to know when rain comes or a change of wind. Both, you see, are of gipsy stock, though otherwise not alike. Keren takes half from the family of the mathematician Dee and has, besides his logic, the cold observing courage of the finished swordsman. The mother was all gipsy, proud and passionate and able to arouse passion in men, some men—which was her undoing."

"I would hear the account of this matter," Tobiah said gravely.

"I will tell what I know," Zachary said, "which is not all, perhaps, for I was young, a mere lad, when it happened, only just come to the town; I arrived but a little while before the trial. But the thing impressed me, more than anything before or since, so I learned all I could and, in a way, came to be mixed in it, at least, in the carrying off of Keren. Though for that I have to thank Dordendoff—as goodly and as learned a man as ever lived!"

"H'm!" said Tobiah, and "To your tale."

"There is not a deal to tell. Ashe and his wife and child were in the town when I came there, but had not been a great while, he having been lost to the ken of all who before knew him since his marriage, which was romantic, there being a love of no common sort between him and the woman he wed. At the time that I came to the town he was in a partnership of work with one Schleger, called 'the learned Schleger,' though without the best reason. Ashe was vastly the more learned of the two; a fact whereof Schleger was secretly very jealous. Mistress Ashe lived in the town, but mixed little with folk, not speaking their language well, and having nothing in common with them. She had no special enemy among them, though certainly no friend. Of Schleger, whom she saw more than the rest, Dordendoft held she had distrust: also that he, though he professed otherwise, disliked and feared her; but that I do not know for certain. Concerning Van Jout I do. He was burgomaster, a lascivious man, though secret about it; it was in him that Mistress Ashe aroused the passion whereof I spoke. She certainly did not seek it, having a love for her husband, as I said, of no common sort; but she likely behaved unwisely to him, haughtily, disdainfully and angrily. At any rate, she turned Van Jout from lover to enemy; though whether it was with thought to bring her to complacency by fear, or by way of vengeance upon her that he instigated the charge of witchcraft, I cannot say. Instigated it was, he skilfully hiding behind his brother Jacob—a religious man of small wit and narrow mind, a fanatical bigot of the most dangerous sort. Jacob had been a great man against witches in the earlier trials, which were not long over when I came to the town and which had been famous for their severity and the number of women burnt. He acted in good faith, I think, in the trial of Mistress Ashe as in the others—and his good faith was worse than his brother's bad for the accused."

"Was she burnt?" Tobiah asked.

"She was sentenced to be burnt," Zachary answered.

"I do not know if the burgomaster intended affairs to go thus far; as I say, I do not know quite what his intention was, or which prompted him, lust or anger, to begin the proceeding. Whichever it was, the end was beyond his control; the matter passed beyond him when his brother was fairly set on, and when the populace was aroused against one who was a gipsy, the wife of an alchemist and dwelling in a town where the witch fever had lately run high. You can see the woman had never a chance, though some did what they could, even to perilling themselves, Dordendoft chief among them. Schleger—I never learned Schleger's part; he saw the burgomaster in private and Jacob Van Jout too, but I have my doubts of him. In any case, the end was, as I say, she was sentenced."

"And executed?" Tobiah asked.

"No," Zachary answered. "She died on the morning of the day appointed."

"By her own hand or the act of God?"

"Not by her own hand—the act of God? I take it He acts by mortal means, and some we are put to it to give judgment upon."

"How did she die?" Tobiah inquired.

"Suddenly, with no warning or struggling; she dropped as a stone drops, without a quiver, some little while after she had taken farewell of her husband."

"Could he—" Tobiah began.

"Have brought somewhat wherewith she might slay herself?" Zachary said for him. "It was thought beforehand that he might try, and for that reason it was with difficulty he secured permission to say farewell. He was searched before he was admitted to her, and one stood by for the minute which was all they were together. It is said neither spoke a word during that time, only took one long kiss, she locked tight in his arms."

Tobiah sat thoughtful. "A very tragical story," he said at length. "Clearly here was an act of God to spare her the last (unjust) extremity. Was there no sign of the method by which it worked?"

"There was observed a very swift and sudden stiffening of her body in death, a *rigor mortis* which set in even as she drew the last breath; beyond that, nothing, except that the inner part of her mouth and tongue were slightly cut or bitten."

"Strange," said Tobiah, "very strange. I have not heard of death coming so. Is it, by any chance, one that a man can procure to himself or by accident?"

"There is a poison that gives the symptoms," Zachary admitted. "One which slays painlessly and with incredible swiftness—ten seconds after being taken into the blood. But it is little known and very difficult to prepare in strength because of the danger to the preparer, who may inadvertently die before the operation is completed. There are but few who could prepare it in strength, and yet fewer who would dare to try."

"Is Ashe of these?"

Zachary shrugged. "I hold him the most able man of alchemists now living," he said, "and as such, doubtless, ready to take what risk the Art demanded. In this matter there is no proof of him; indeed, there was no suspicion, not of him nor any other."

Tobiah admitted that reasonable. "I do not see how any should convey poison to her."

"As to that," Zachary answered, "there are some so far expert that they can make small globes of glass, of the size of an hazel nut, and an exceeding thinness; in these they can enclose rare or dangerous substances, closely luting afterwards so that nothing escapes. Such a globe could hold vastly more than a sufficient quantity of such a poison, and could be easily held in the mouth and passed by the lips through other lips. And when it was broken and the tongue or mouth cut by the glass fragments, the poison would enter the wound and do its work; in ten seconds, nay, less, from the breaking there would be a corpse, already stiff and rigid."

"Oh?" said Tobiah; he found it marvellous. "This is a thing most swift and deadly." Afterwards he went

on to speak of the way of passing and the fine glass globule. "Are there many so expert as to make these?" he asked.

"I know of but two now living," Zachary admitted, "Dordendoft being dead; and one of them was not so expert at that time, being very young. Nay"—as Tobiah looked with inquiry—"I will not play with you—I think, though I do not know, that Ashe, who loved as it is given to few to love, sealed his love as few are called upon to seal it, and made the last kiss of life also the kiss of death."

"He slew her?"

"So I believe," Zachary said, and Tobiah regarded him sternly.

For almost a minute the Dissenter sat looking sternly before him, then—

"The ways of the Lord are certainly strange," he said, "and pass man's understanding."

Zachary gripped him by the hand. "I thought I had not been mistaken in you!" he said.

Later he explained how he came to be concerned in this affair of long ago, for, as Tobiah reminded him, he had, as yet, not spoken of that or the girl-child Keren.

"There was little spoken of her at that time," he said. "After these events she was given to be brought up by some straight people of the town, so, it was said, that she might be trained away from her mother's ways and people. Ashe left her with them, it was useless for him to attempt otherwise, and at that time he had no thought nor heart to do it. For more than a year she was left so; I saw her often, for, as I said, the trial and what after befell made a deep impression upon me. At the end of that time Dordendoft arranged for her to be conveyed to her father, whether at Ashe's request or at his own idea, and because he thought to save the man's reason thereby, I do not know. Arrange it he did, employing me to carry her to her father; this at my own request, and also because I was English, and, moreover, young and quick, and always somewhat expert in getting out and away."

"H'm!" said Tobiah. "And that was the end?"

"That was the end," Zachary answered; "neither Ashe nor Keren ever went back to the town, and she, as you have seen, has no certainty of its real existence."

Tobiah sat thoughtful. "Yet," he said at length, "it appears Ashe has had dealings with it; this letter—"

"May have come from elsewhere," Zachary reminded him; "there are other towns in Flanders, and other parts, too, where this herb is used."

But Tobiah scouted the possibility: "The Lord," he said, "is not one to confound His servants; He has, in this paper and this long laid up memory, given us a guiding; it will lead somewhere, not nowhere and to confusion. The letter is from the town without doubt; now, from whom there?—This Dordendoft?"

"He is dead, and has been this long time. The letter is not from him; nor yet from Schleger, I had known his script. I heard he was gone from the town a year ago; they had plague there then; he may have returned if it is over, but this is not from him."

"Can Ashe have gone to him?" Tobiah asked.

Zachary could not tell. "I have no good reason why he should," he said; "nor yet why he should go to Reutzberg at all."

"We can discover if he be there by directing a letter to him at the place," Tobiah suggested; "or if not that, by your writing an inquiry to one there with whom you are acquainted."

Zachary declared that useless. "It is thirteen years since I have been there," he said. "I know none to whom to write. Also, if Ashe is gone, it is not openly, nor in his own name."

Tobiah glanced up. "Nay," Zachary said, meeting the look, "I do not know for what he has gone, if gone he has, and, being a man of like passions, or somewhat like, I do not inquire. But I wish, I cannot help wishing, he had not been gone so long, six months, more than six—"

"Sir," said Tobiah, "I took you for a Christian."

"Of sorts, of sorts," Zachary answered. "Let's to bed."

They went up together and parted at the stair head, Zachary as they bade good-night repeating his uneasiness. "Six months. It is long, too long. I do not know what to think; less still what to do."

"The Lord," Tobiah replied, "gives light to them that seek it."

He himself sought, for he was in much doubt about the whole matter, both as to giving judgment on the past, prognostication for the future or decision how to act in the present. There was to him no reasonable doubt but what the torn letter was from Reutzberg, a guiding to them that Ashe had gone thither; but as to how they should deal and what do, he could not decide, though he considered much with himself. In the morning, being in no way resolved, he turned to the Scriptures. He let the Bible fall open of itself and with closed eyes dropped a finger upon the page, reading the verse whereon he lit. It was the fifteenth verse of the fourth chapter of the Second Book of Kings: '*And he said, Call her. And when he had called her, she stood in the door.*' This might seem to some but a dark passage, as applied to the present difficulty; at the outset it appeared to bear only one possible interpretation, that Keren should be called and the matter given over to her discretion and judgment—an unwise and unsuitable proceeding, seeing her years and sex. Tobiah knew there was another interpretation than that to be found; he searched for it, and also spoke of it to Zachary.

Zachary listened, but without the interest he usually showed for what the Dissenter had to say. At the end he said, "As concerning Keren, I am with you; I have a high opinion of her judgment, but in this case she has not all the facts, and I do not think to give them to her."

He did not say that Tobiah also had not all, those that concerned *Ultio* and the plague at Reutzberg in particular, but so it was; he alone knew or surmised those. He did not speak of them, though they pressed upon his mind

and had all night. It was they which helped him to the conclusion that was forced upon him.

"It is coming to me," he said to Tobiah, "that the only thing to be done is for one to journey to Reutzberg and see what has befallen. I think, with you, that Ashe has gone there; and, seeing the time he has been gone and no word heard of him, there looks as if some evil had happened. If so, there will be no hearing it except by going there; and no one likely to discover it when there except me."

Tobiah considered a little, then he said: "Possibly you are right; but have you the leisure and the means for the journey?"

"Leisure—that is nothing, time is mine, not I time's; I have said that before. Means—I can raise the wherewithal, I do not travel expensively; a man need not, as you know, more especially when he can, as I can in Reutzberg and other places where the adepts congregate, earn something more than keep with ease. These are not the things which make me consider."—They never were, else he had not carried the light heart and purse he had heretofore. "If they were all, I'd be gone to-morrow—to-day—with no more thought about it. The question is: Keren."

"Surely you do not think to take her?" Tobiah demanded.

"Lord! No!" Zachary answered. "To Reutzberg? Never!"

"That is well," the Dissenter said; "I did not know but what you had some such mad fancy. Since you have not, I see no difficulty about it; she can easily be disposed of till you return. She can abide here a short time and after go to Mistress Shipp's daughter in London, until it is desirable she should return to Colchester, which, let me tell you, will be soon after I come there. I think to set out now; I have waited upon opportunity long enough. If you undertake this journey I also will undertake the other, so soon as I have seen the maid placed in London. Things fall out pat."

"Yes," Zachary said, but he said it without great conviction; he was by no means sure of Keren's part in the scheme. She had found freedom once; he was doubtful if she would put on trammels again, or return to the household, however kindly entreated, from which she had escaped.

It is possible Tobiah also had some slight uncertainty, or at least some doubt, as to how it might answer. He asked questions of Zachary concerning the probable duration of the journey and the time when he might return with great particularity; summing in his head how long, at the shortest, the girl would need to be disposed of. Zachary answered him as he could, principally his answers were that he did not know; then he went out to seek Keren.

She was in the orchard behind the house, spreading to dry the linen Giles' mother had just washed. He waited for her to finish, leaning in the far corner by the broken fence. Beside was an elder bush late in flower, the yellow white blossoms heavy against the pale sky. It was a sunless day, very quiet, with scents hanging in the air and trees for the first time showing mature, solid green and very dense.

Soon Keren came to him, and at once he spoke.

"That smell you discerned yesterday," he said, "it is the smell of an herb much used in a town in Flanders—sundry towns, doubtless, but one that I know for certain."

"The town of which I dreamed or thought?"

"Yes," he said, and she asked—

"It is real, then? I think I always knew in a sort that it was real."

"It is real," he said, "and you really there at one time, but many years ago; you went from it when you were but three years old."

"In snow time."

"Yes, in snow—it is the town where your mother died."

She looked up quickly.

"I believe that your father has gone there," he told her.

She did not speak for a moment, then, "Some evil has befallen, I think," she said; "evil things happen there."

"You do not know that," Zachary said; "you have no reason to think of evil there, only a faint memory, revived by the scent, of evil things which happened and were felt when you were at the town and too young to know."

"Maybe," she admitted. "Maybe it is a feeling, no more. But my father has not returned."

He could not deny it. "I think to go and seek him," he said.

He spoke carelessly, as if this journey were no different from and undertaken with no different purpose than the other far wandering journeys he was wont to make. But even as he spoke he met Keren's eyes, and at once knew that she knew the exact quality and degree of his thoughts about Ashe.

"He meant to be away long," he argued with her, "that is clear by the arrangements made; though, I own, I do not think he meant to be so long as this. I do not know that I suspect anything, I do not even know with perfect certainty that it is to Reutzberg he went."

"Reutzberg?" she said. "That is where Sir James Belton went last year. My father, then, knows the town? He did not say so when it was spoken of while Sir James was here."

"It was never his way to speak much of his affairs," Zachary reminded her; "he was always a silent man."

"Yes," she said and sat thoughtful, recalling both what had been said that evening, more than a year and a half ago, and also other things. Soon or late she would get to the *Ultio*, or some question or surmise about it. Zachary, who knew the method of her mind, was nearly sure of that.

He roused himself. "I do not know what has chanced," he said, "as I say, I do not know that I have a suspicion; but it is true, I do think something has befallen. Nay, I will tell you, I am nearly sure something has."

She nodded; it was clearly no surprise to her.

"But there is one thing you can believe, I am sure of it: whatever has happened to your father has happened with his will and not against it; by plan, not by accident."

"Yes," she said. And later asked a promise. "Promise you will tell me what has befallen," she said; "promise to tell me when you know, whatever it may be."

He hesitated a moment, pulling down a branch of wild rose and bending it in his hand; then he promised. "Yes, I will tell you," he said, though he knew it might mean more and worse telling than appeared now. After all, she had a right to know, at least she was of the stuff which could hear even such a tale as this might prove to be if all told.

He let go the branch, and the pale pink flowers shivered as he did so.

She turned from the scattering petals; she had disliked the scent of roses since that night a year ago, and ever would.

"They're all over," he said, as she picked the pink leaves from her gown. "All over for now. And next year's flowers are not this, and we cannot tell who shall gather them."

He watched her throw away the last petal and looked beyond her to the surrounding trees. This, too, was over, this sojourn at Lowbole, the island lost in the sea of trees. He turned, perhaps minded to speak of it; perhaps intending, as he certainly ought, to speak of what she would do till he returned with news.

But before he could do so Giles called.

"Mistress!" he cried, and then, seeing them, came nearer, shouting the surprising intelligence as he came.

"There's one coming to the door! There's a coach coming up t' drive! Come quick and see!"

Keren came. Already she could hear the wheels and the sound of horses' feet. The surprising news was true, a coach and six, with mounted servants, was coming between the beeches to the house. A thing such as had occurred only once before in her memory and which then had this in common with the present happening—the coach both then and now brought Lady Belton to Lowbole.

The lady was on her way to her sister at Waltham Cross, and remembering the hospitality of last year, and having

then, as we know, conceived some kindness for Keren, be-thought her to turn out of the way to visit the Grange. She had time before her, for Sir James was abroad, Masterton not yet returned from Italy, and the days long for the poor lady. It was these reasons which had prompted her to go to her sister, and which made a day or so more on the journey, at this season, when ways were good and the weather fine, of small account.

"So I thought I would come," she explained to Keren half wistfully, just a little shyly as of old. "Does it put you about that I should come thus unbidden?"

"Why, no," Keren said; "I am pleased, honoured that you should come at all"; and she led her in and attended her.

She led her to the blue room as on the former occasion, and the lady smiled and then sighed as she noted it to be the same. Certainly in outward look there was small change in the house at Lowbole, little difference from the time in the spring of last year when she and Masterton abode there.

Later four sat at supper together in the dining-parlour, just as four used to sit in those days. But only one of the four, my lady, was truly the same. Keren was not the Keren of then.

They spoke a little of the past time, of my lady's health and Ashe's skill and Masterton.

At the mention of Masterton's name, Tobiah inquired where he was and what he did.

"He is abroad with my brother," Lady Belton said.

She seemed a little surprised he should ask, but Zachary explained there had been acquaintance between them in Colchester.

"Since when has he been gone, my lady?" Tobiah asked.

"Since early May," the lady answered, and Zachary looked across at Tobiah.

"Sir James and you will have missed him," Keren said—much as one who speaks of the weather; whereof, indeed, she went on to speak, as being propitious in May for

one who made a journey and pleasant now for those who remained at home.

But Zachary suggested to Tobiah that there was stuff for a sermon in the matter of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, the woman who succeeded in the business wherein Barak, the son of Abinoam, failed and was held back.

"I hold not with the making of fine and set orations," Tobiah returned; "I preach—and I speak—as the Lord gives me utterance, being careful for nothing but to speak truly."

Zachary acquiesced, giving him proper honour for this, and Lady Belton turned with some question of Wythes Hall and Mistress Clarinda.

Concerning the latter she herself gave news, saying the young lady was now gone to Chelmsford, where, it was rumoured, she was recently betrothed to some kinsman or close friend of her mother's family.

"Ah!" said Zachary. "Without doubt Madam expresses her satisfaction thereat?"

"I have heard the contrary," Lady Belton said, "but I think that untrue. No doubt she is as pleased as one would look for her to be."

"No doubt," Zachary agreed; he knew exactly how displeased Madam would be, and the subject was dropped for others—the doings of the step-brother, Hugh, the absence of Dr. Ashe, the fact that Keren had spent the winter in Colchester. All matters touched on lightly, summer's day talk, with no appearing of anything that mattered or was of importance. Gentlefolk's way, of which Tobiah did not approve, but in which Keren and Zachary played an equal part.

The worthy man looked from one to the other of them and frowned.

"The lightness of your talk scarcely becomes you, mistress," he said to Keren, "seeing that we have some doubts about your father, and some fears likewise."

"Fears?" cried Lady Belton. "Has any ill befallen him? I am grieved for that!"

And one could see in her face the ready sympathy of a gentle and tender woman who has suffered fears and alarms herself.

Tobiah looked upon her with approbation. "Madam," said he, "we have no news of Dr. Ashe; the which, seeing the time he has been gone, is bad."

"Has he been away long then?" the lady asked; they had not told her, only said he was from home. "Where is he now?"

"We think in Reutzberg," Keren said.

"Reutzberg!" Lady Belton exclaimed. "That is where my husband went a year and a half gone! It is a sad place; they had the plague there most shocking. I trust that your father is not there!"

"The plague will be gone by now," Keren said; "I do not fear infection for him."

"Nay, I hope not," the other answered; "I hope the sickness may be long done. But if it is to Reutzberg he is gone it may be a while before he returns; it is a weary journey; it will be long before he can be back again. You cannot stay till then in this lonesome spot." It did not occur to her that Keren had already long stayed. She turned to Zachary. "It is impossible, is it not?" she said. "She must come away, if it is so far as Reutzberg Dr. Ashe has gone, it is impossible for her to wait that time here. She had best travel with me."

"You are very kind," Keren began; "but—"

"It is not kind," the lady said, and again came the wistful look in her eyes. "I would much like to have you travel with me; I—I am lonely—rather lonely. I would be glad to have your company. Sir James is away. I am much alone. Indeed, it would please me well to have you abide with me till your father returns."

At these words Tobiah considered. He himself had undertaken the disposal of Keren; but he knew there might be more difficulties in the way of that than there had any right to be, and he was in some little uncertainty about the method of it. When Lady Belton spoke there was

recalled to him the verse he had read that morning: "*And he said, Call her. And he called her, and she stood in the door*" In his own mind he had called, and here was one who had come to the door; it might very well be "*she*."

But it is useless to wish for light, and not open the shutters. Accordingly the worthy man determined, whatever folly of reserve or keeping affairs to themselves the others might practise, he would speak freely.

"My lady," he said, "Dr. Ashe has been gone since mid-December, no one knew where until yesterday, when we had evidence that he had gone to Reutzberg."

"Since mid-December!" Lady Belton cried.

"Since then," Tobiah made answer; "at which time he arranged that his daughter should remain in Colchester; where she abode until a while ago, when occasion arose for her to leave, and I and my friend escorted her hither, thinking to find her father returned or about to do so."

"And he has not?" Lady Belton said. "Oh, child!" She turned commiserating eyes on Keren. "And you all alone!"

She put out an impulsive hand, half shy, half sympathetic. Keren took it with strong cool fingers that gave support rather than asked it.

"We do not know why he has not returned," she told the lady; "but, fearing that something may have gone a little amiss, Zachary is about to set out for Reutzberg to inquire if he is still there and how he does."

Lady Belton approved the plan and sympathised with the anxiety one must feel. "It is by far the best way," she said; "you cannot know easiness any other. Letters tell so little; it takes so long to receive reply. But even thus, even at the best, it will be a great while before you hear. Time is so long when one is anxious."

She began to speak of the journey from particulars she had had from Sir James, but soon came back to Keren—Tobiah may have brought her there, but she showed herself quite ready—declaring that Keren must abide with her till they had news of her father, or till he returned.

"I shall be truly glad for your company," she said sincerely. "I am so much alone; we will encourage each other when we are anxious or sad. You must not remain in this lonesome spot any longer; we will travel to-morrow."

"But, my lady," Keren protested, when she had thanked her, "you travel to your sister to-morrow."

"You must come too," the lady said; "my sister dwells in a house as big as a village, alone with a husband who employs himself always with sport, forbidding her the town or any company but me, and giving her nothing to do but yawn all day. She needs encouraging almost, though not quite so much, as you and I. We will travel to her to-morrow, and remain with her perhaps a week, perhaps more; and afterwards go to London, there to wait news or perhaps the return of—of your father, or some one."

And thus the matter was settled, by Tobiah's good offices rather than by the other two. Keren, for her part, thanked the lady for her kindness and ultimately accepted it, though Zachary was not quite sure whether or no she meant to in fact as well as words. He himself approved the suggestion on conditions; at all events, it seemed better than any other to hand. He spoke his agreement to Lady Belton, but in private warned her it might be longer than she thought before there was any news of Dr. Ashe, owing to a good deal of anxiety on his account.

This warning only made the kind lady more decided that Keren was to come with her.

"All the more need she should!" she said, and her eyes filled with tears at the thought of the girl's solitude and also at the recollection of the kindness she herself had received in this house.

"They were goodness self to me," she said; "I have a debt I cannot repay; I never had such skill as Dr. Ashe showed, and for his daughter—she is a sweet creature, she did me good, she has strange quiet ways; I could love her, though she makes me sad and a little, a little—"

She did not seem to know quite what she would have

said and so left it unfinished, only repeating that Keren must come with her and remain till her father returned.

And to this Keren herself agreed in the few words Zachary had with her late that evening.

"Since it cannot be at Lowbole," she said, after speaking gratefully of Lady Belton's kindness, "this were the best to be done."

"It cannot be Lowbole," Zachary assured her. "Our friend Tobiah goes to Colchester, nothing can keep him here; it is not well you should be here alone for a time unknown, even were it likely you would be left undisturbed, which you would not; Tobiah and the Shippes would see to it that you did not abide solitary."

Keren knew that, and he went on to say it would be easier for her to get news in London; it would reach her sooner there.

"Yes," she said; "also, from there I can come back to Lowbole if need be, without great difficulty and without Master Tobiah and the Shippes knowing thereof."

"There will be no need for it," Zachary told her.

"I think not," she agreed; "but one does not know. I will not unless I am put to it, and I do not think to be. Nay, I will wait you in London if you desire it; I can wait there for news."

With that she bade him good-night.

"Good-night," he said and watched her go upstairs. Watched the flicker of her light along the wall till it sunk into the darkness above, and the sound of her feet merged in the rustle of the breeze that stirred in the draughty house.

The next day there was departure from Lowbole. Tobiah, as well as Keren, was prepared to go early.

"It is high time I returned," he said to Zachary. And Zachary could not say "No," for not only was it likely that Madam's animosity was past, seeing Masterton was gone and Clarinda betrothed elsewhere; but also my lady had spoken of the recent repeal of the edicts against Dissenters. There was nothing to urge against the worthy

man's going; though it is likely he would still have gone if there had been, for he held it time and his work here finished. So he packed his bundle and took up his staff.

That same hour Keren departed. She, like he, sat easy to the cumbersome things of this world and could be ready, when she deemed the time to have come, without words or palaver. She gathered the little she had to gather, spoke the little she had to say in farewell, and got into the coach—the lightest equipped passenger who had ever travelled there, to the annoyance of my lady's woman, who dared not, and never did dare to Keren, show her contempt.

Zachary bade her farewell and watched her go. He watched the coach rumble down the drive amidst the clatter of horses and the confusion of servants. At the bend she looked out, a quiet dark face, the face of one who waits; a hand that signed a signal of understanding rather than farewell. He watched her go, and he watched the others too. He saw them all from the house; my lady and my lady's servants; Tobiah, with his face set for Colchester and his trust in the Lord; Giles and his old mother, carrying the broken victuals in a cauldron and trudging away into the Forest. He saw them all go. Then, having closed the house in every part, he came out at the back and locked the door, putting the key under a loose brick by the well. Then he, too, picked up his bundle and set out.

CHAPTER XVIII

OF WHAT BEFELL IN LONDON

KEREN sat with Lady Belton. They sat in a fine sleeping chamber in Sir James' London house; or rather Keren sat, Lady Belton lay upon the bed, for though it was still early in the evening, she was tired with the day's journey. They had but that day come to London, although it was almost a month since they left Lowbole. All the while between had been spent with Lady Belton's sister at Waltham Cross, in the great house where her husband insisted on living, even in this season when sportsmen have little to kill. The young wife was glad enough of companionship; and if she did not want so much consoling as her ladyship, being of a more sprightly nature, she was still pleased her sister had brought Keren with her, and in her company found, for the first time, something of interest in country surroundings and some occupation in the great house even on wet days. She was sorry when Lady Belton decided to go, but found it useless to try and detain her, for Sir James had commanded her to town.

Sir James had not written to his wife all the month through. Not for the month before that, her sister told Keren. The young matron told her a good deal about Sir James, the name of the French woman who was his present infatuation and much more, most of it of the sort Mistress Shipp had held unsuitable to a maid's ears. This, of course, when Lady Belton was not by, though when she was the sister spoke rather slightly of Sir James; and his wife, Keren observed, did not always defend him. Of choice my lady did not speak much of him at all; still less of Masterton. Twice or thrice during the visit letters

came from the latter; Keren would have known of their coming had nothing been said by a certain flutteredness and youth in the lady's manner. She answered them, that Keren also knew, coming forth from her chamber on those days with ink on her fingers and a glow on her cheeks. Had Masterton been here now—had he been by to proffer unspoken sympathy for this most flagrant desertion of Sir James, to offer solace respectfully, and love that was delicate but also human and consoling, it is possible he might not have offered in vain. But he was not; and at length came a letter from Sir James.

Or, rather, from another on his behalf, saying he had received a hurt and was coming home to London and desired his lady there. At that Lady Belton said they must go; and they went the next day.

Here they were now, arrived some hour or so past, at the house which Sir James owned in town, but which had until recently, till the time of Squire Ward's death, been let to him and his wife. It was in the very room where Keren and Lady Belton now were that the Squire had died, though all looks of such gloomy happenings were gone; the walls rehung with pink silk, and the furniture new in the latest mode from Holland, suitable to the occupancy of a lady of taste. The whole apartment was finer now than the one beyond, which in Madam's time had been counted best, and so appropriated to her.

Keren and Lady Belton did not speak of these late tenants, having other matters. The lady spoke of Sir James, debating how he was hurt and how much, saying that had he sent her word she would have gone to him. Which, no doubt, she would, though she spoke with but little eagerness and soon let the matter drop; talking, instead, of Dr. Ashe and Zachary Ward, wondering when Keren would have news, and of what sort it would be.

Till now she had little, none worth the having, for though Zachary had been nearly a month gone, there had been no good intelligence. He had written once, the letter received not a week ago and still fresh in mind. In it he told how

he had come to Reutzberg and there learned Ashe had, indeed, been there in the winter, but was gone away again. He spoke of having difficulty in establishing the fact, for Ashe, as he had foreseen, had not travelled with his own name; and had also contrived to be little observed. Zachary spoke of some doubt as to whether he had not come back again in the spring of the year. At all events, one, Schleger, had come back to Reutzberg then, having been travelling from place to place on academic concerns before that. Zachary seemed to think that this man had returned soon after Schleger, perhaps had followed him from place to place, though not catching up with him, and coming back to Reutzberg soon after he did, in April. But of this there was no good proof, not even absolute certainty that Ashe had come back to the town at all; no one there had observed him specially, or taken any note of his doings or goings. One thing, however, was clear, he was not there now; and another thing clear was that Schleger was not either. That learned man had gone away again soon after his return, no one knew where or why, and had not been heard of since. A thing which would have made more stir had he not been of the Adept band, who like to preserve some mystery about their goings and affairs. This was all the news that Zachary had to write; not much, perhaps, yet imperceptibly, there had crept into the letter a note of warning. One felt the growing belief in the writer's mind that Ashe would never come back again; that he, with his doings and goings so little observed, had passed from beyond the knowledge of men.

Keren felt this as she read, even as she had felt foreboding when she first found the scent in the drawer at Lowbole. And feeling it made her speak to Lady Belton that evening when they came to town.

"Would it not be well," she said, "that I went elsewhere? When Sir James returns I and my presence may be some inconvenience to you. Would you not rather that I went away? It seems it may be some while before I have news of my father—and possibly but ill news when it comes."

"Nay, child," Lady Belton answered, "that is but a stronger reason for you to stay! You must remain till you have news. I promised Mr. Ward; I am sure I owe it to you and to your father too; 'tis but a small service for all I received. Not a service at all; you are a comfort to me, a support, and that is a thing—"

She broke off, not choosing to finish what she had begun to say, but explaining, "You will understand I am anxious till Sir James arrives. 'Tis natural when one does not know the extent of the hurt. You will cheer me till he comes and help me pass the time. When he arrives—why, then, we can see."

So it was left, and in the few days which intervened before the arrival of Sir James Keren did cheer and support her ladyship, partly by filling her mind with other thoughts and occupations, partly by her nature and some quality of strength there was in her.

Sir James came by water to London; it was the easiest way for a man who could not ride, and Sir James would ride no more. It was a broken man who came back to Lady Belton that July. Not one who had fallen in a duel, fought on account of a lady more kind than virtuous, as the young matron at Waltham Cross had hinted to Keren. It was no sword thrust received in fight and recovered from slowly, which had laid Sir James low, but a cudgelling given in a Paris alley by hired bravos; an ignominious beating very nearly fatal. Between life and death he lay in the poor house to which he was taken by some Samaritan and where he and his quality were alike unknown. When he came back to such life as was possible to him he did not choose to reveal his name; nor did he choose that his wife should know of his plight; perhaps from pride, perhaps from some shame too, one hopes so—one may always hope. But in the end she must know, for, when all that could be done was and he had recovered as much as he could recover, he was still helpless; one who would wear out the rest of his days crippled and in pain. So it was a broken man who was carried into the house

that July day; one who must lie upon his back weak and suffering, or drag himself from room to room on others' arms, less easily than a child. One who must be dependent for all cheer or lightening of the weary days upon his wife.

Keren saw him borne in; from her station beside Lady Belton she saw him. She saw more than that; with a perception swift beyond my lady's, she saw not only the querulous suffering face, but also the bitterness and the ignominy and the long helpless years that stretched away. She saw it before Lady Belton had grasped the nature and the full extent of the hurt. She felt the lady's hand press on her arm; the outraged and deserted wife had taken her arm at the sound of steps, standing thus with her to receive the returned. She stood, as those that bore her husband came in, pressing upon the arm. Her eyes grew wide as she watched them—wider as she saw and began to understand, then—

"James!" she cried, and dropped on her knees by the couch where they had placed him.

"James—"

She took his hand in hers and held it to her heart. The heart that had fluttered at the coming of Masterton's letters, her hand that had supported itself on Keren's arm when the steps of the bearers sounded at the door—Keren and Masterton and all forgotten in this tenderness and pity.

Keren went out and closed the door. To her mind recurred words Zachary Ward spoke concerning one who thought to love and thought not to forgive, and she knew now that he was right, such an one had not learnt even the primer of love. None the less, the relentless justice and logic in her did not acquit Sir James of blame nor hold my lady up to highest admiration. "This is a great thing," she thought, "but not the greatest; in the greatest there is no forgiver nor forgiven, nor any need to forgive."

Do any think that by this catastrophe which had overtaken him Sir James Belton became at once a noble and reformed character, a patient sufferer and a loving, considerate and grateful husband, they understand little of the

man and less of human nature. He was a complaining and impatient sufferer; a snappish and exacting husband and a petulant and dreary companion, cursing fate, cursing his luck, cursing men and things, everything but himself and the real cause of trouble. The occasion, in these early days, seemed likely to turn to profitable account, although to compulsory amendment in some respects; he had not even a conviction of sin, let alone any perception that he received the wages thereof. One had despaired of any profit arising to him, did one not remember the long patience of God and the slow working of time.

On that first evening of his arrival Sir James' temper was more than short, and his manner fretful and sneering by turns. He was spent with the journey, suffered much and was, one thinks, perhaps a little shamed too.

Lady Belton hardly noticed; she was all taken up with thought of his hurt and anxious hopes and fears for its extent and eventual recovery.

"If I had only known earlier!" she said to Keren. "I would have fetched the best physicians in London to him. I am sure they could have done better than this; I am sure I could, none could have nursed him as I. If he had but let me have a word I would have flown to him, no matter where he was!"

Keren remembered how she had said before that she would have gone to her husband had he let her know; but with a difference in the saying.

"I would not have asked him aught," the lady went on, then, remembering the girl, added, with the loyalty of wives: "Not that there is anything here he would not wish me to know, anything whereof to be ashamed; it was not that which held him back."

"No," Keren said. "Doubtless he feared to distress you; he shrank from your pity and distress. There are some who shrink from these, and to whom commiseration and pity are painful."

Lady Belton agreed. "He was ever of that sort," she said; "he could not bear the sight of distress. You could

see to-day how words and tears and pitying looks wrought upon him. I must learn to control my feelings; I must practise fortitude and practise to speak in your quiet way."

It was already apparent that Keren's quiet way was more agreeable to the injured man's jangled nerves than that of any other in the house. In the days that followed it became more clear; he approved her ministrations—or less disapproved them than he did those of others. Her light step and silent movements, her low voice and the watchful eyes that observed all, even wants before they were spoken, made her presence more agreeable to him than that of others—not excepting his wife, who could not but shed a tear or express grief at times, though she strove not to do so, and humbly, and without touch of jealousy, set herself to copy Keren's ways. Between them they waited upon the sick man and entertained him as well as they could, the latter more difficult than the former until Keren learned to play at cards. When she had done this they found the time pass better; indeed, so well that in a while Lady Belton, although brought up straight, would have her teach her to play, so that she might be able to amuse her husband when the girl should have gone away. So the days went, and never any talk of Masterton in all this time, hardly his name spoken, until, at the end of August, he came home.

On an early day, the earliest he could accomplish, and that was surprisingly soon, he came to Lady Belton.

Keren was not there when they met, remaining with Sir James when the lady was called to him. They were not, however, long alone together; in some quarter hour Keren heard Lady Belton's voice in the hallway. Sir James' room was upon the ground floor for the ease of movement, and the visitor was in the room the opposite side of the hall. He or Lady Belton had opened the door now, and she spoke in the doorway. "Come and see James," she said, and her tone was as the tone of a young mother who has a first babe and honours a friend by bidding him look upon this Grace of God to her.

Keren, in the corner where she sat, smiled a little, a smile that was grim, though withal a little pitiful too.

Masterton came and saw Sir James, and, naturally, saw Keren too.

"What, Mistress Ashe!" he said, with the remembered softening in his voice. "This is a pleasure I had not looked to have! You have deserted the lonely house in the wood? I hope your father is well and all the good folk there?"

"My father is from home," Keren answered; "the others are well, I believe."

Lady Belton explained that she abode with them during her father's absence. "For which we have reason to be glad," she said. "Have we not, James?"

She put a caressing hand on the coverlet upon her husband's feet; and he answered "Yes," more civilly and warmly than one had been used to hear him speak.

Masterton turned a compliment to include both ladies; at which Keren smiled faintly, observing the old grace of speech. But Lady Belton did not attend; she had perceived her husband's hand, which was without the covering, and felt it to see if it were cold, and he did not immediately withdraw from her hold.

Masterton turned to Keren, and asked her how she liked the town, forgetting that it was somewhat nonsensical to ask a girl in close attendance upon an anxious wife and crippled husband, or to speak, as he did, to her of gaieties and sights. But there is this excuse for him: he was so moved on other accounts that it was wonder he remembered to speak to Keren at all; only by breeding that he masked what he felt and talked on indifferent topics that did not in all sorts suit.

Soon he took his leave, Lady Belton praying him to come again.

"Come soon," she said. "Come any day that you will. James will be so glad."

He came again. He was a persistent man; moreover, men do not easily give up great hope, and one that they have had reason to cherish and think may be fulfilled. He

came again—and Lady Belton left him alone with Sir James.

“Men like to be together without us of whiles,” she said sagely to Keren; “they can talk of things they cannot when we are by.”

He came yet again. Sir James was not so well that day, and Lady Belton talked of him and anxieties about him for a short half hour, then she must go back to his side—perhaps her cousin would escort Keren forth the while? Keren had been summoned to tell of the invalid’s state and Lady Belton, hearing he was easier, would go to him. But the air, she was sure, would do the girl good, would not her cousin play escort? The girl, however, declined to take the air on the plea of fatigue, and Masterton went away, after expressing a hope that she would rest herself and take care of her health.

Yet a fourth time he came. Keren was present when he entered on that occasion—she and Lady Belton alone—and she overlooked in his eager greeting of the other. She saw, unobserved, the outstretched hand, that stood for outstretched arms, the burning eyes, the love not expressed but ill concealed. And saw, also, the lady’s complete unconsciousness and her preoccupation elsewhere.

“It is good of you to come again so soon!” she said. “James, I’m sure, will be glad. I’ll tell him you are here.”

The eager hands dropped. “Let me do that,” Masterton said and went with her to the door. “May I not do that for you?” he asked with tenderness. “May I do nought, not even that?”

“Oh, no,” she answered serenely; “it is my hour to go to him now.”

She passed out smiling, and he turned back. And, inadvertently met Keren’s eyes, watching eyes that saw and weighed and judged, eyes which he had never truly seen before, as he had never truly seen her. Their regard was gone almost as it came, as a light suddenly revealed and suddenly cut off when the shutter of a lantern is slipped. But it had been there, and by it he was stripped bare, barer

than he had ever been even to himself; and, thus naked, he showed no heroic thing. The colour rose to his face, and for a moment his look was that of the discovered, the frustrated and humiliated man.

"Sir James is better to-day," Keren said. "It is hoped that soon it will be possible to move him to Colchester; he thinks to be better there. Do you not think he will?"

"Yes," Masterton said; "'tis wholesome air."

He rose quickly to the line she had cast him, recovering himself and bearing himself with grace; but for the moment he had been speechless, it was she, not he, who had stepped into the breach. And though he afterwards talked with an ease and a brilliancy that was notable, something was gone. Something never came back again in the few more times that Keren saw him.

They were but few; he came but twice or thrice after that day and with longer intervals between; then he ceased to come altogether and she saw him no more. In her heart she pitied him, though more for the quality gone out of him than for the loss of hope he had sustained. He was one who knew the best of love and of renunciation, and, choosing neither, sought the second best, and such must pay, and often the price is to become but second best.

So he went away and only one visitor came to and fro to the household, Lady Belton's young brother, a gallant youth, ready to encourage his sister, to play by the hour with Sir James or to escort Keren forth when she would come. Most ready to do the last, perhaps, or more ready to play with Sir James if Keren would take a hand; but a sweet-natured youth, who brought talk and gaiety and some wholesome mirth to the household.

About this time Keren received a second letter from Zachary.

It was not a long one, but it contained news. Zachary had, he wrote, established beyond doubt that which he had before suspected, namely, that Ashe had travelled to the places visited by Schleger, but after him, having been detained by severe illness at the first and so not succeeded in

catching up with the stronger and better equipped man until his return to Reutzberg in April. Ashe had returned to the town then, soon after the other; Zachary had established that too, though with great difficulty, for the return seemed to have been of a secret nature, and Ashe had disappeared again soon after. A little before Schleger also disappeared. So far Zachary had not discovered where he had gone—where they had gone, rather; he was convinced it was to the same place that both went, although they had not left the town together. For this conviction he did not give reasons, though he clearly had some facts to go upon and even more suspicions. He wrote that he would not lay them before Keren until all was proved beyond doubt; but he warned her not to hope. Though he did not tell her why, he was, it was plain, morally certain her father was dead.

"But, my child, does he know?" Lady Belton cried, when the news was given to her. "It seems he does not! I am sure there is reason to hope!"

"I think not," Keren said. She had thought not, with a growing strength, for so long now that she felt no surprise and no doubt about this; to her no new thing had happened and nothing really strange nor unexpected.

Lady Belton put her arms about her. "Poor child!" she said, and pressed her gently, tears coming to her kind eyes.

Tears did not come to Keren's eyes. How can one cry for a matter that is so old, and how struggle with or bewail what is as inevitable, as inexorable as Fate? Ashe himself was in some way as Fate to Keren, as inexorable, as unswerving and as distant and little known in the springs of action. It were useless, almost an insult, to bewail what he did or what had befallen him, which must be what he himself had chosen.

Keren was sure of the last. Alone that evening, as she prepared for bed, she went over all she knew and was the more convinced of it. Nay, for long it seemed she herself had truly known that this end was coming. It had been a

long time coming, like the slow closing of twilight on a winter's day—a day that almost from noon was a closing. The knowledge of this end had been coming to her almost all the summer, of course ever since the discovery of the scent, but before that too. For nearly twelve months, since she had last seen Ashe, it had been coming to her, though the first clear note had been struck in his letter in November. A warning had been struck in her soul then, though she had not quite understood it, only felt it uneasily. She realised now what the feeling had been and knew that this end had already begun to come then. It had begun earlier than that. Looking back over the years, the image of Ashe, of a still half life, of a watching and a waiting, rose up before her. All life had been but a half life to him, apart from the Art; all else a waiting, a stillness and, outside, a coldness which had culminated in death. She felt sure of it. She did not need Zachary's proofs to assure her. She knew without them that her father was dead; they could but tell her how he died. She desired to know that, although she felt the knowledge might be in some way terrible.

She folded the letter, which she had read again, and put it in a drawer. She was ready for bed now, and, having shut the drawer, extinguished the light and got into the great bed. The room where she was was a fine one—in fact, the one which had been appropriated to Madam's use in the days of the Wards' tenancy. Keren had not occupied so sumptuous an apartment before; but some accident had befallen the window of the one where she had slept since coming to town, so she had to-night been moved to this. It was a large room, having two doors, one opening on to the stairs, the other into the chamber where Lady Belton slept. The hangings were of green damask, the curtains of the carved bed of cut velvet, the chairs and stools upholstered in the same; all heavy and still handsome, though a little worn. Keren lay down under the dark canopy, but she had little inclination for sleep. She lay thinking—a fatal thing does one hope to court sleep—her mind

travelling back over the past; not repining or bewailing; re-living, rather, and slowly exploring and examining in the patient inexorable way which in time discovers most things.

It was an airless night; not hot, perhaps, in the country where one gets cool breath from trees and the dew on the grass; but hot here in town, for all that the shutters were open and the windows wide, contrary to the seemly custom of towns. Through the unshuttered windows the moonlight fell, showing the device on the damask, even the nails which ornamented the edge of the velvet chair. And through the window also there came noises, intensified by night. Heretofore Keren had lain at the back of the house, which, though less important, was quieter; the noises here seemed to her ceaseless, and, to her acute hearing, prodigious. For long she listened to them as they crossed or blended with the trains of thought in her mind. Sounds of watchmen going the rounds, sounds of late roysterers returning; sound of clocks, many clocks, near and far off, striking the hour, striking another hour. Sounds of early toilers setting forth; sounds of market carts rumbling in from country places, not passing the house but to be heard from other streets. Sounds of two who quarrelled over the price of something done last midnight; sounds of a laundress beginning, before a day, her day's work and clattering pails at a distant pump. All these and more, a ceaseless hum and a sense of restlessness. Keren was not restless, she was as still as was her wont, but wide awake. Even when the irritation of the noises got the upper hand and she ceased to think in the clear concise way, she did not sleep, but lay watching the shifting moonlight and the patterns on the damask upon the walls of the unfamiliar room.

At last, however, she began to grow drowsy; the patterns began to run together and the sounds blent and grew less distinct. They had almost become one and she had almost fallen asleep, when one suddenly detached itself from others and she was awake again.

It was a new noise, different from any which had gone

before—the rustle of paper or something stiffer than paper; a rustle and a gnawing. For an instant she thought of the letter, then she remembered she had put it in a drawer; this sound came, not from a drawer, but from the floor or wainscot of the room; it was something stiffer than a letter, mice were rustling and gnawing upon it. For a little she listened to it; listened so that soon she heard nothing else, and heard it, in the growing irritation of night and weariness and strain, till it became enormous and unendurable. At length she sat up. It must be stopped, or she must arise, dress, and go to some other room to wait for day. As it was impossible to do the latter, she must do the former.

There are men who have spent half a night finding precisely where it is that mice are gnawing and rustling in a wall or floor, and when found failed to stop them for any length of time; in half a night not doing what any cat can do in half a minute. Keren, perhaps, was more kin to the cat. She sat up in bed, quite still, listening; then she arose and went directly to a place by the wall; there she stood for a minute—five minutes, more, as still as a watching cat. In a little the gnawing and rustling, which had stopped when she first moved, began again and just before where she stood. There was nothing on the floor there, she could see in the failing moonlight; the sound came from behind the wainscot. She listened a moment, and her fine hearing told her that it was some biggish thing and stiff which the creatures were teasing, no scrap of torn paper which they could have carried to their hole.

She felt the woodwork over, and soon found where the top ledge was broken away; with a little pushing there was made an aperture into which a stout letter or piece of paper could have been slipped. She felt about in the obscurity; but the hole seemed too small to allow of one feeling within, still less of withdrawing what might be there. But it was useless to scare the mice to silence and to try to sleep with the certainty that they would begin again shortly; to lie listening for them were as bad as

hearing them. So she pushed and pulled and forced the opening with slow but increasing force, until she was able to insert a comb, and then some thicker article to act as a wedge. When she had space enough she crept in her hand, an extremely slim hand and a supple one; had it been otherwise it had not gone in or been of much service when there. Even as it was, it was nearly fixed once; quite fixed and held fast at the wrist for a little when she reached down behind the boards. With the tips of her fingers she touched what she sought, folded paper or parchment. For a while she fumbled, stretching the full length of her hand, which was long as well as slim; then she got the paper between two fingers and, with difficulty and after several times letting it fall, drew it to the top of the hole. There she held it by an edge with her left hand while she worked free the imprisoned right; that done she easily pulled the paper out. The moon was so far down by this that the room was nearly dark; she could only see that she had the paper, and feel that it was folded, gnawed at the edges and covered with dust. But what it was did not concern her, she had silenced the mice, and she was satisfied with that; she put the paper on a table out of reach of the creatures and went back to bed. And, either because she was satisfied or else because she was tired out, before long fell asleep.

In the morning when she woke she recalled the incident of the night with the slight contempt we feel for trifles and disturbances which have bulked so large to our night selves. She went to look at the place in the wainscot, and found that there was, as she had thought last night, a piece broken by time or accident. It was no regular opening and not made for a hiding-place; indeed, the aperture was too small for that; it was only by the chance that the wall was somewhat hollow here that there had been space below where an article inserted could drop. The paper she had drawn out lay where she had put it. She took it up. It was parchment, not paper, written upon the inside only and not much damaged by the mice. She unfolded it and

looked it through. Then, seeing a familiar name in the body of the text, she read it from beginning to end. It was the will by which Squire Ward bequeathed Wythes Hall, with the rights of marsh and mere and wood, to his eldest son.

She read it carefully through, and if she did not fully comprehend what it was, she at least had some idea. She did not know there was any such will made or missing (nor, indeed, did Tobiah). But she knew from what the worthy man had said and what Zachary had, when he was making talk with the Dissenter of an evening at Lowbole, that he, the eldest son, had some claim and Madam not the best right at the Hall. She considered the document carefully. Was this that for which Tobiah had held that Zachary should go to London and inquire or search? If so he might have inquired or searched for very long, for ever almost, and found nothing. It was by the veriest chance it had been found. She glanced at the wainscot and wondered how it had got there. Slipped in by accident or design? Not accident, no accident would get it there. By design then. By some one who was disturbed when in possession of it? Such a one might have thought to afterwards recover it and found it impossible to do so; no hand much bigger than a child's could get in at that aperture, and no child's hand would be sufficiently long, nor yet strong and supple enough. To recover it, whoever put it there must have afterwards found there would be necessity to take down a part of the wainscot. And, since that had not been done, either for fear of creating a talk or for lack of opportunity, the person must have felt there was no need; believing that what she could not recover no other would, and that the document was safe from discovery till the woodwork concealing it had crumbled to dust—till it, too, was dust and all those whom it concerned.

Keren wondered a little what to do with it; then decided to do nothing for the present. When Zachary came back she would give it to him and he could do what he chose. She was not sure that it was valuable and valid;

Zachary's manner, in the evening talks with Tobiah, had shown to her, if not to the Dissenter, that he had no intention of moving in the matter discussed and, she fancied, no real belief in any good to arise from it. It was quite likely that there was no good in this; that, for some reason which did not appear to her, the document was no use, no more than waste paper, which as well might have been left to the mice—except for the intolerable noise they made. She decided she would carry it to Colchester when she should go there with the Belton household and show it to Zachary when he returned.

But she did neither of these things. She did not go to Colchester with the Belton household, for Sir James took a turn for the worse and could not be moved for a month or more, so the household did not go. And during that month Tobiah came to London on some ministerial business, and, as was his duty, came to see how she fared and what news she had from Reutzberg. And to him she showed the document; and he advised that it should be given to his keeping, as he held it might be of value and she had no place of security wherein to keep it against Zachary's coming. Accordingly she gave it to him and he bore it to Colchester—where we will now return.

CHAPTER XIX

OF THE COMING OF TOBIAH TO COLCHESTER AND OF HIS GOING TO WYTHES HALL

CONCERNING the doings of Tobiah the Dissenter in Colchester that summer there is not space to write in full. They were many, we may be sure, and profitable we may be equally, or even more, sure. He was returned to the town by the end of June and at once and mightily wrought with his flock there, in general and particular. With Samuel Calderbeck he had to do without waste of time, forcibly reasoning with and reproving him in public and private, convicting him of error and of mischief done, in the ears of many. In the course of time, and that no long one, Calderbeck withdrew and troubled the town no more. Indeed, he largely gave over preaching soon after that, having got himself seriously mishandled by boys, who were in the habit of running after him, calling upon him jeeringly to show them the devil, and casting stones and refuse upon him. Some one missile among the rest struck him upon the head, and more weightily even than the strong words of Tobiah; at least, it was more powerful to persuade him to silence. As I say, he gave over preaching, left the town, and ultimately joined the Church, though whether from conviction or convenience is not known, certainly at that time there was a fresh persecution against Dissenters. At the close of his days he might have been found in Braintree, mending shoes, which he did badly, and snuffing the candles for parson and ringing the bell—which he did worse.

With the Shippes Tobiah also dealt early upon his return—both with Simon and his sister Rachel. With Rachel he dealt the more, for Simon was already a good deal reduced

by his wife and by his own experience. With Rachel, Mistress Shipp had had less to say; on one occasion only had her tongue run free; afterwards she reminded herself and others (also Rachel) that "the poor soul was a lone, lorn spinster, past her youth and soured for want of husband and child, and so perhaps not all to be blamed if she was crazed after a he-preacher, even though he was one weak in the wits, or took up with any tale that a sickly maid told her." The which kindly view pleased Rachel very ill; indeed, it is possible, she liked it even less than Tobiah's dealings and reproofs, though these were plain and erred not on the side of finicking.

But in one thing Rachel had her way; that was in the care and upbringing of the girl Kate, which she desired should be transferred to her. She declared in a burst of wrath, after the bout with her sister-in-law, that the young girl was not properly regarded nor understood in Betsy Shipp's house; she demanded that Kate should come to her. And Betsy Shipp replied, in an equal burst of wrath, that Rachel might take the girl and welcome, she'd been more than enough care, to say nought of the trouble and mischief she'd made. So Kate went to Rachel, for Mistress Shipp had brought her baby grandson from London and his mother with him to finish recovery in her native air; and Kate was found a trial in the house with them. She would brook no consideration of another invalid than herself and she plagued the baby as much as he plagued her. So Betsy felt it well she should go to Rachel; and she sent her, meaning, for her temper cooled as soon as it was hot, to have her back again when Peg was gone. But she did not do so, for not only was Rachel desirous to keep her—and the allowance Simon Shipp made with her—but also Tobiah, on his coming to Colchester, strongly recommended it.

"Leave be, leave be," he said, for he held the Lord means that the backs which take to themselves burdens should keep them; and that these two might be sent as a discipline and a staff of correction the one for the other.

And so it came to be when Mistress Shipp, not unthankfully, left them to one another. They became gradually more and more securely riveted together, and gradually an increasing burden each to the each; disliked and disliking and yet unable to break away.

But at the vintner's it was a happy summer indeed, when once Betsy was assured that Keren was safe and well and in such good (and high) company as Lady Belton's, Peg grew strong as the days went; her husband said he hardly had known her for the same woman when he came to fetch her away. The baby was a jewel and a joy, the finest baby in all the world; Betty, the distraction of half the lads in the town, bestowing most of her favours on him. But Julia, at the lawyer's next door, bestowed hers on Richard, having forgotten her fancy for Sim—after all Sim was only a boy—and every one was pleased. Mighty pleased, too, at Blue Pale, where Millander hoped in the autumn to emulate Peg and give her husband a son; the Widow Stettin was sure it would be a son and, in consequence, was to every one most benign.

Mistress Shipp, looking round upon her family and her neighbours and counting all that had fallen to her share, said to Simon, "Simon, man, 'tis wonder to think how we're blessed, it fairly makes me to weep! I've nothing to wish for but that we had Keren here—I'm sure she'd be happier with us than with the grand folks in London. But maybe we shall have her by and by, if her father dies—not that I'm wishing him ill, poor man, though he's been but of little use or kindness to her of late, one's apt to think. But there! What will be, will be, and no doubt for the best, especially if she come—pretty one!" she caught up the baby; he held out his arms to come.

Of Tobiah's personal affairs there is nothing but what is satisfactory to relate. As we know, the charge against him in the spring had never come to much or been brought to Court, so there was no chance of it being renewed, more especially now that the acts against Dissenters were, for

a time, repealed. And he could not be charged with having broken prison, for he had not been there to break forth. Wythes Hall was no prison, and Madam no gaoler when she undertook to have him in keeping to oblige a friend—one whom she had no desire whatever to oblige now; rather, much the reverse. Her bitterness against Masterton was great, and had been ever since his going away in May. He had gone then without a word to her or Clarinda, only a message of farewell, politely framed and meaning nothing at all. Beyond that nothing, and no talk of the courtship, if that it can be called, which had never got beyond two visits, or at the most three. Madam was very angry with him; Clarinda was angry too, though in a less degree; she had not built so much on his coming; also soon after she went to Chelmsford, to relatives there, not so finely bred, but very admiring and well-to-do. There, in the early summer, she was betrothed, as Lady Belton had said, to a comfortable man of no special degree. The which further roused the indignation of Madam, who looked higher than that and was as angry to be thwarted by her daughter as flouted by Masterton, as she held herself to be. Indeed, with one thing and another, the lady had enough on her mind at the time of Tobiah's return without giving consideration to him, even had she any desire, as she had not, to recall the affair of the spring. But Tobiah gave some consideration to her and noted attentively what befell, the further trouble which afflicted her that summer, and other matters.

In early September the good man, as we know, went to London. This on some matter of petition of Dissenters to the Parliament, the Lieutenant of the County, or some other of high name, much talk and no do. The which petitioning proved a waste of good ink and the going a waste of shoe-leather, as Tobiah had foreseen and warned several. Still, the journey was not wasted for him, for by reason of it he heard Keren's news from Reutzberg and also brought home the document she had found through

the mice. The last he held to be of some importance, possibly a rod in pickle for Madam at Wythes Hall. He laid it up with care against the return of Zachary.

Towards the end of the month there was much rain; it rained then for about a week with little ceasing. On the sixth day of the week at evening there came a knocking at Tobiah's door. It was past twilight and late for any to come to him in such ill weather except on urgent business. He set down his candle and went to open.

Without, at the top of the high steps which went sideways to the street, stood Zachary Ward, most extremely wet.

"What!" cried Tobiah, and "You are welcome," and he had him in.

"I had not known you were returned," he said, as he led towards the room at the back.

"Nor any other, either," Zachary answered, "for it is but a late achievement, and seems hardly a profitable one, if I have quit the sea to be drowned on land. How long is it since this second Deluge has begun to overtake our corrupt generation, and who is the second Noah? It were well to make friends with him; also have some hand in the designing of the Ark if one is to get quarters there."

He stopped on the threshold of the room. "You will have need of a mop and pail," said he, "if you have me within as I am; the loan of some dry garments first were perhaps an advantage to you as well as much comfort to me."

The which Tobiah perceiving to be the case, he at once set about seeking them. And while Zachary put them on he cheered the fire and busied himself to set supper. He dwelt alone in this steep yellow house of his, an elderly woman coming of a day to do what service he required, but leaving him betimes to wait upon himself, which he preferred. He had but just finished to set the table when Zachary entered re-apparelled.

In the firelight he looked most extremely thin; at first one might have thought it was the greater breadth of To-

biah's clothes, which hung loose on him; but it was not so, he was truly lean, hands and face as well as body, with the leanness of scant food, not scant health. It was borne in upon Tobiah's mind that he had lived small of late, perhaps even for a good while. It also occurred to the worthy man that he had borrowed garments because he owned none but the wet ones just removed.

"Yes," Zachary said, divining the thought, "that is so, I possess nothing but what I stand in—nay, not that, for it is yours; I possess what I stood in when I entered and what lies now a-drowning in a pool of its own tears—not unwarrantable, either, if shed for its condition, which is bad."

"Ah!" said Tobiah. "Your affairs have not prospered in a worldly sense?"

Zachary shrugged. "That is as you reckon it," he answered. "I have found what I set out for, and contrived to live while finding it, though that was a longer time than I looked to spend. The living was not rich, I own; it was from hand to mouth, more hand than mouth, if the one stands for seeking and the other for the eating thereof. How did that come about, you would hear? In the first place I had to travel rather much, moving more than I looked for, the which is in favour of spending and against earning. In the second, when I came to Reutzberg the learned there did not desire my services. I boasted to you that I could earn my keep by some of the crafts I know wherever the learned in alchemy are gathered together—it was a vain boast; I could not. The learned of Reutzberg would have none of me; or, rather, in a while they wanted so much of me that they were for clapping me in prison."

Tobiah was, naturally, much interested in the last; seeing his own experience, one who had been taken on a trumped-up charge had his attention. He inquired into the matter particularly.

They were at table now, the candle standing among the victuals between them; by the light of it Tobiah could see

lines about Zachary's eyes which had not before been there. The eyes themselves were as light and bright as ever, changing blue and green, but graver and older, though they still looked out with the same gay bravery.

"I was not a great while in durance," Zachary said, "at least, so I am told; otherwise I had put it at some several years. It is astonishing what an arbitrary thing is our measure of time—figures on a dial, revolutions of sun and moon—and one may put a lifetime between the passing from one figure to the next, or nothing at all in a hundred revolutions of the moon! I understand now how an hundred years may be as a watch in the night to Omnipotence, and one day as eternity and forever and ever to man—under conditions. There is stuff for sermons here."

But Tobiah, although a mighty preacher, was not minded to consider the stuff; the practical, more than the philosophical, was his vein. "For what were you in prison?" he asked.

"For somewhat the same as you were nearly once on a time," Zachary answered. "A right and necessary interesting myself in a matter which some might hold not to entirely concern me. The matter, the disappearance of one Schleger; the interest, to discover how it occurred and if final and fatal; the consequence, aroused suspicion that I had a share in the disappearance, though it was five months old, or else was in league with others who had; that I was, in general, a bad character and, in particular, one who could show neither substantial friends nor means of livelihood. On these counts I went to prison—and there learned what I could not outside; so, I suppose, I should not bear the folk of Reutzberg an everlasting grudge."

"What did you learn?" Tobiah inquired.

"Besides the measure of time? The true taste of night under open heaven—I thought I knew the innermost sweet of that before, but I did not till I also learnt what it was to lie with humanity—to ever lie with it! To touch it

day in, day out—and night—Lord! I think I can devise a Hell with any one now!”

He broke off and never again spoke of the sojourn in prison, except to say—

“I met with one there who, by strange chance, knew what I had long sought to learn; and who, by reason of our becoming friends in misfortune, was induced to confide it to me. We broke prison together—he is the most unhandy man at an escape that I ever fell in with! I had got forth forty hours sooner had it not been for him!”

“What was it he told you? The manner of the man Ashe’s death? I take it, you have proved him dead?”

Zachary nodded. “Yes, I have proved it,” he said; but no more.

Tobiah, after waiting for him to speak, observed: “I saw Mistress Keren-Happuch a while since; she seemed convinced of her father’s death; this will be no news to her.”

“No,” Zachary said.

“How did he die?” the other asked.

“As he would have chosen.”

The Dissenter naturally desired more information than that.

But Zachary did not give it. He hardly noted that anything was asked; the mention of Ashe’s death seemed to have brought a cloud of thought upon him. At last, however, and when Tobiah had spoken once or twice and that not unemphatically, he roused himself. “It would scarcely seem my tale to tell,” he said; “it is not that I would not trust you, friend: you have shown yourself my friend before this and also Keren’s—yet I must ask that you hold me excused from telling what is scarcely mine to tell.”

Tobiah frowned. “Did the man die so ill?” he said. “Is there here such a mass of iniquity?”

“What is iniquity?” Zachary asked him. “Nay, I know there are laws of right and wrong, and in the main it were best following them and erecting no fancy of a

man's own to walk by; but some once in a lifetime one may fall in with that which is beyond one's judgment. We read, '*there is Another that judgeth.*'"

"As to the last," Tobiah said, "you say well; nevertheless, I would be resolved—"

But he was not; indeed, Zachary heard him little, seeming burdened with his own thoughts. "If the doing was terrible, the provocation was no common one," he said once; beyond that, nothing, except, "I have written to Keren."

"To what purport?" Tobiah demanded:

"To tell her what has befallen," Zachary said. "I promised before I went that what I learned she should know; and I have kept my word, though it were a hard and an ill matter too. I debated much whether to do it—debated whether to write, to speak or to withdraw and beg to be excused from my word. But in the end I wrote—wrote the whole from the far beginning—and have more than a misgiving about it."

"When sent you this letter?" Tobiah asked.

"A little while since," Zachary answered. "I have had the news and my own freedom but a little while. But she will have had the letter ere this; I sent it to her here in Colchester."

"Here?" said Tobiah. "She is not here, she is in London, and like to remain."

"Are you sure of that?" Zachary asked. "I had word from her that she was coming here."

"That may be," Tobiah answered; "but she has not come," and he went on to explain how it had befallen.

Zachary nodded. "My letter will be still lying at Belton's house here," he said; "it was there I directed it. It will be there still, she will not have had it."

He started up as he spoke; but Tobiah put a detaining hand upon him. "What would you do?" he asked.

"Recover the letter."

"Not now," Tobiah said. "Either it lies at the house safe, in the which case it can remain until to-morrow, be-

fore when nought can be done with it; or else it has already been borne to London with other matters of the household, if one had occasion to ride thither; in the which case there is nothing to do at all. In neither case do my garments go forth in such weather; they are my newest, I would have you know."

Zachary sat down again. "You are right," he said, "and there is nought to do now—I' faith, I am not convinced whether I would do aught an I could! When the letter was gone, I would have it back; if it were within grasp, I am not sure."

Tobiah had small patience with such shilly-shally. "Do as you deem best, do lustily, and trust in the Lord," was his opinion. "Moreover," he said, "I see small need for this anxiety; would you prevent all distress from the maid? '*Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward,*' and woman also; she may as well begin her apprenticeship now as later, she is neither child nor fool. I daresay, also, the young man will offer consolations to her."

"What young man?" Zachary asked quickly.

"My Lady Belton's brother," Tobiah answered; "he frequents the house much, escorts her forth to take the air and other such folly, in the main harmless, to which youth is prone. He is a goodly enough person, comely to look upon and of an agreeable and, I believe, honest behaviour."

"Oh!" said Zachary. "Keren said no word of him in the brief letter she writ me."

"Likely not," Tobiah answered, "maids most commonly use a foolish secretness in such matters; thinking, like the fabled bird of the desert, that by hiding their eyes—that is, not mentioning the man—they conceal the whole body and prevent others from observing what fills their minds and time."

Perhaps Zachary recalled how Keren had practised a discreet form of such reserve in the spring when Masterton came to Lowbole. But he did not say so, and Tobiah went on to speak of my lady's brother, concerning whom he had

made sundry inquiries and learned little but what was to his credit.

"He is," the worthy man said, "reported to be of a sober behaviour and sweet temper, besides being sufficiently provided, youthful and of good reputation. Something too highly placed—I hold not with high placing, as tending to pride and naughtiness; still, if he thinks on marriage with the girl, it should be considered upon."

Zachary looked up sharply. "If he does," he said, "or, rather, if she thinks on it, it is a thousand pities that letter should go! I must have it back if that is so, or else unsay every word of it. If, by ill luck, she already has it, I must confess myself deluded and a fool when I wrote it; make a good case of a seemly death in bed for Ashe and lie circumstantially all about it. She will believe—if she meditates this marriage."

"You most certainly will do no such thing," said Tobiah. "If you attempt it I shall enlighten her."

Zachary laughed, not a gay laugh. "You will not be able," he said. "If she meditates this marriage I can deceive her against any enlightening of yours on this matter. You could no more enlighten her than I could deceive her, no matter with how circumstantial a tale, if she—if she is still Keren of Lowbole and the woods."

Tobiah did not believe it, nor yet did he approve what was said; but he was not backward to discover, or think he did, one thing under it.

"You would appear not to favour the notion of this marriage," he said.

"I?" Zachary said. "Has it aught to do with me? I did not know it. I favour it well enough if she does; I would want nothing better for her if she wants it."

He pushed his chair from the table, the meal being done, and he seeming to think the conversation done likewise.

Tobiah, however, had more to say and said it, speaking with severity on deception, and also with consideration on Keren's state and future. He spoke, too, on the chance that Lady Belton would incline to approve a union between

her brother and the girl, having, as she had, an affection for her, and being unlikely to stand in the way of the two if they were minded for each other in earnest. "And seeing the maid's lonely condition," the worthy man said, "I can think it were not an ill thing for her; a maid alone in the world, as she is, were perhaps best disposed of by marriage."

"Likely you are right," Zachary said.

He spoke indifferently, as one not concerned in the matter. "Why canvas it further," he said, "it is much the same in the end."

"The same in the end?" Tobiah said frowning, "I trow not. What, pray, do you then hold the end?"

He had risen, too, and now began to take the dishes from the table. Zachary came to help him, but he would not have help.

"The end?" Zachary said, drawing a chair to the hearth, "the end of all things is death, is it not? The end of love and the end of hate, and the end of life; at the end of life there is accomplished little more than death. I'm not sure the end is not better than the way there. 'Tis a weary business living."

He took the pipe from his pocket and fingered it thoughtfully.

"I do not hold with you," said Tobiah.

"No?" said Zachary, "likely not." He blew into the pipe softly. "I will make you a Song of Death."

"'Tis Reaper Death that lays thus low,
And bids leave toil and quietly go—
Give him a greeting!
He's not unwelcome, nor a foe,
Nor is there, friend, a cause for woe,
Cease weeping.

"See, when the hours of day are run,
See how there sinks the round, red sun,
Still shining.
And I, now play and work are done,
Can go at call of this master one,
Without repining.

"Of joy and sorrow I've had my fill,
Shared some good and borne some ill,
Time's for requiting.
There's one before me over the hill—
Death's not parting. Nay, it will
Be re-uniting."

Tobiah snorted. He went from the room at the beginning of the song to carry dishes to the kitchen, but returned before the end, which came with a sudden upward burst, strangely uplifting. He snorted.

"There is no such one as you tell of over death's hill," he objected; "there is none such for you there; it is untrue to say so in song; also foolish."

Zachary pleaded for the licence of poets. "Every poet is permitted it," he said. "Moreover, you err, there are for me some over the hill—Dordendoft is gone, Ashe gone, my old father gone."

"That is not the common interpretation of the words," Tobiah returned; "they are framed to refer to a woman, the which, you once told me, you had not, nor ever felt desire to embrace. If that saying was true, and I think it was, this in the song is false and also, as I say, foolish. But as touching your father, of whom you spoke; concerning him, or rather his testamentary intentions, I have news for you."

"Ah!" said Zachary, but without eagerness and still drawing soft notes from his pipe. "From Nahum have you it? Or from Madam? Have you had speech with her?"

"I have not," Tobiah answered.

He rose and went to a chest, fastened by a chain about the leg to the wall.

"I have had no words from or with Madam," he said, looking among a bunch of keys for those which would unfasten the locks. "Nevertheless, I know of her state and that she has ample matters of her own to attend to; the Lord now requiting her. Her daughter is wedded, to

her dissatisfaction, in Chelmsford; her son, as you may have heard, died this July."

"Died!" Zachary said. "Nay, I had not heard it! How did he die?"

"A fall from an horse—a mettlesome steed he was little minded to ride, I have heard, being but a clumsy rider and timorous; but Madam would have him do it, thinking to have him cut a figure that way; she is one prone to such vain imaginings."

"Poor step-brother Jacob," Zachary said. "A short life and, I fear, not a very merry one."

He sat silent awhile fingering the pipe. "And Madam is alone at Wythes Hall?" he said meditatively.

Tobiah nodded. "She is," he answered. He had now got the document and brought it to the fire.

"What is this?" Zachary asked.

"A will by which your late father bequeathed you the Hall."

"The will!" He took it and examined it. "The will Madam declared destroyed," he said. "Where had you it?"

"It was found in London," Tobiah answered, a little annoyed that no greater eagerness was shown.

"Ah, yes, to be sure—in London. I remember now Keren spoke, in the letter she writ me, of some paper concerning me which she had found. She did not say what it was, perhaps did not know; her letter was brief, and chiefly touched upon Ashe."

He folded the document together, rather absently; maybe he was thinking again of the other matter she had not written in that letter.

Tobiah regarded him and his absentness with disapproval: "I take it this is good?" he said, tapping the document. "That by it the covetous woman is displaced and you inherit?"

Zachary looked up from the fire. "Yes," he said, "I suppose so. But I suppose that had befallen in any cir-

cumstance now. The house and land were my step-brother's actually, not Madam's, and at his death without a will—and it is not likely that he made one—they would fall to the male heir-at-law, the which I am, as Madam once told me.—Poor soul, it's a bitter ending for her!"

He put the document down and sat looking into the fire.

Tobiah observed him with small approval and some perplexity. "What do you purpose to do?" he asked.

"Do? Concerning this? I don't know."

Tobiah frowned. "Something should be done," he said. "What?"

Zachary asked the question, but did not heed the answer.

"Why shame her?" he said, as one following his own train of thought. "She lied and she stole, that is so; and we have discovered her, that is so also. I have a distaste for another's uncovering, I ever feel a participation in the shame. Her lying and stealing was for her children; and one is dead and the other gone—She must be a desolate old woman now."

"Will you for that leave her possession of ill-gotten gains to the encouragement of evil and evil-doers?"

So Tobiah demanded; but Zachary seemed indifferent. "I can recover without shaming her with this," he said; "at least, so I suppose."

"H'm!" said Tobiah. "She's in possession."

Zachary agreed. "But I can be, I expect, when I wish—I'm not sure I do wish now—what should I do in Wythes Hall? What should a man do alone? I daresay it is as well as it is for the present."

Tobiah rose. "It were as well that you were in bed," he said shortly. "You are clearly not your own man to-night; the sooner you are between the sheets the better, and may the Lord bless sleep to you that you may get some sense there!" and he had him above stairs.

One thinks Tobiah's pious wish was fulfilled; at all events, by morning Zachary was more nearly his old self—

that one which by habit took the world smiling and was seldom brought low either by the contemplation of his own happenings or those of others. It is true he would do nothing in the matter of Wythes Hall at present, no more aroused to it this morning than last night; but that was not contrary to the old self.

"We can consider that anon," he said, nodding to the document which Tobiah had brought forth and which lay upon the table beside the platter of radishes. "Lock it up for now; when I am here again we will discourse upon it; it can lie till then. For the present I must go to Belton's house here, and afterwards to London. I shall go there whether the letter has or not, though I'd sooner it had not. When I see Keren and see how things are, I can deal accordingly."

"As touching her father's death?" Tobiah asked. "I conjure you to speak truly of that; remember how saith Solomon: *'The lips of truth shall be established for ever; but a lying tongue is but for a moment.'* And *'A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape.'*"

Zachary agreed to that. "Far be it from me to question the sayings of the wise king," he said. "Nevertheless, I own I have not much opinion of the man who never tells a lie, though still less of the one who ever does, except in the Great Necessity."

"And what is that?" Tobiah demanded. "What, sir, do you venture to hold to be that?"

But Zachary did not say, and in a while the worthy man, having again admonished him, turned to speak of Lady Belton's brother, and the question whether or no it were desirable (and likely) that Keren should marry him.

"As to that," Zachary said, "there is an old saying it were well to remember, one which advises not to cross the bridge till one comes to the stream. One does not know till one gets there whether the river is going to turn aside and form a peaceful mill-head, work the wheel, grind grist and fill the pool amidst flowering banks—a goodly useful

thing; or whether it is going onward through lonesome country, following its own way through rough and smooth, to the sea."

"I do not take you," Tobiah said.

"Likely not," Zachary answered; "the loss is mine."

After that he asked of the news of Colchester, and whether Tobiah had discovered the blockhead who spread report of two drunken vagabonds seen with a wench between Earl's Colne and Gosfield in May last. And when he had heard that, so far, this was not discovered, he went on to speak of other matters and to entreat a loan to defray the journey he would make to London. What with this and other things time was filled till he would depart. This he did without entering upon the subject of Wythes Hall.

"We can discourse on that on my return," was all he said when Tobiah brought it forward; "it will keep till then."

But it did not.

Zachary went to London, whither he found his letter had, by one day, preceded him: but Tobiah remained in Colchester. And to Colchester that morning came news from Wythes Hall.

Tobiah heard it when he walked forth to take the air and attend to the matters of sundry; which he did betimes, the rain having ceased for a little, though the day moist and overcast. The news was that Madam was about to sell the goods and gear at Wythes Hall, and to offer the house, with marsh, mere and wood, to a gentleman but lately come to the country and desirous of an estate here.

"Ha!" said Tobiah, when he heard this, and "Hum!"

And he went home and considered with himself.

A sale or a let cannot be effected in a day; nor even, is it likely, in two, three or four; and Zachary might, at the quickest, be back here in four. But also he might not. Seeing it was Zachary, the "might nots" were as strong as the "mights," on the whole stronger, a deal stronger even though his inheritance was here.

Tobiah cogitated. Zachary had said of the document, "Lock it up till I return" and also "'Tis likely I'd inherit without it and in any circumstance now." But he had not looked for aught to happen; he had not thought of Madam's taking action; the which might indicate that she deemed she had right, under some will of her son's, or that she meant to use the power she (wrongfully) had before another could put in a claim. In either case it were folly or worse—an encouraging of wickedness and evil-doers—to say and do nothing. While Zachary attended to the affairs of Keren and the late Thomas Ashe, or wandered the country in pursuit of some whimsy of his own, the deal might be done, the cause of right and justice might be frustrated, and the avaricious woman again successful in her ill plans before any interfered. Tobiah saw plainly that something should be done. Yet he debated. The document had been committed to his care; and though he had not in words promised to leave it untouched till Zachary returned, in fact he had almost done so. Also it was possible that Zachary might be so foolish as to prefer it so left in spite of the present happenings. He had shown small anxiety to push his claim and to shame the woman at Wythes Hall; it were possible to conceive him foolish enough to halt now on some fancy, until the right course was plainly shown him. And, and this was the pity of it, he was not now here to have the right course shown him. The matter certainly offered perplexities.

Seeing this, and being unable to decide upon it, Tobiah had recourse to his never failing source of enlightenment—to wit, the Scriptures. And, as ever, there he obtained light.

The text which was given him (by the before described means, which were the ones he ever followed on such occasions) was the 18th verse of the sixth chapter of the first Book of Samuel: "*And the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines, belonging to the five lords, both of fenced cities and country villages.*"

Reading these words the way began to be made plain to him. He recalled how it was the mice that had brought to light this document, the existence of which was as truly a memorial against Madam (a daughter of the Philistines, uncircumcised in heart) as ever were the golden mice against the five lords mentioned above. And even as the memorial against the lords was made public both to Israel and Philistia, surely it was meant this other should likewise be made known?

While he meditated upon this the wind, which was gusty and uncertain that day, came in by the open door and rustled the leaves of the Bible, turning them hastily, halting and turning again, and stopping suddenly as it died down. The place where the pages were stayed was the Book of Ezekiel; at the bottom of the page Tobiah read these words (iii. 17): *'Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at My mouth and give them warning from Me.'*

He closed the Book; it was revealed to him what he was called to do.

That same day Tobiah set out for Wythes Hall, sufficiently provided against rain, and carrying the document in his pocket.

While still a short way from the gates of the Hall he fell in with Nahum, or, rather, met him coming in the opposite direction.

"What!" the old man tried. "You back hereabouts?"

"This while past," Tobiah answered; and greeted him in the name of the Lord.

Nahum returned the greeting, but gloomily; he appeared to look sourly upon the world at the present time and all the happenings of it. "A pretty place!" he called it, "and a pretty muck is made o' most things. Where's Master Zachary? That's what I want to know. Why ain't he here?"

"He is to London," Tobiah said, "this morning gone."

"This morning gone!" the old man cried irefully. "It's

not gone he should be, but come! There's business enow here!"

"So I have understood," said Tobiah; "I am deputed in this."

"You!" Nahum exclaimed, and his eyes screwed up scornfully, much like those of a fierce old hog. "Who sent you?"

"The Lord," said Tobiah.

Whereat, it is sad to relate, Nahum looked more than ever like the aforementioned beast. "Oh!" he grunted, and then, "Good-day to ye, I'll get goin'."

"Good-day," Tobiah replied with kindness, and inquired in passing if Madam was now within.

"She's within, fast enough," Nahum said, and then, over his shoulder, "You baint seekin' her, be yer? For what?"

"I have that which it behoves her to see," Tobiah answered; "the will by which her deceased husband bequeathed the Hall, with marsh, mere and wood, to his eldest son, now wrongfully displaced by her."

"What!"

The old man roared the word, and when Tobiah had repeated himself, clutched him by the arm.

"Say it again, master!" he cried—"Say it again, and show'n to me!"

Tobiah drew the document from his pocket.

"Eh, but it's good!" Nahum chuckled, "it's good. But we have you now, mistress," and he laughed aloud, then paused half doubtfully. "If so be it stands with lawyer?" he said.

He peered anxiously at Tobiah, who assured him that he believed all to be fair and in order.

"I will read you some portion of it," he said, and they withdrew to the hedge. The rain was not now so heavy as sometimes, and under the shelter of the hedge Tobiah read some part of the document aloud. Nahum listened and stamped with his feet in the mud and water below, as one who cannot contain his joy; the rain, however, coming on heavily before long, brought the reading to an end.

Tobiah folded and pocketed the document and prepared to go on.

"I'll round to the house," Nahum said. "Don't be too hasty; give me time to be by to open the door when ye knock. Two knocks upon it, I'll know it's you then. Never fear but what you'll get in." And he hobbled off at an astonishing pace.

Tobiah had no fears but that he should get in, with Nahum or without him; nevertheless he did as requested and went, at a moderate pace, to the gate and by it to the drive and the main door of the house. There he knocked, and was instantly admitted by Nahum.

"Yes, sir," Nahum said in a loud voice, "Madam's within." He led the way to a door. "She'll see ye, I make no doubt.—One to speak with you, mistress," and he flung open the door.

Now Madam had not seen Tobiah when he was taken to the Hall last April, so she did not now know who he was. But, prejudiced by his apparel and mien, and rendered still more proud and cross-grained by recent happenings, she did not receive him graciously.

"What is your business with me?" she asked shortly.

"I have a word for you as touching this house and land," he answered, and she looked surprised; she had not thought the business would concern that.

"Such matters should properly be carried to my man of affairs," she said; but bade him speak on and be brief about it.

"It is a matter first for your ear only," Tobiah said; "afterwards it must be as you will. It is written in the Book of the Prophet Habakkuk: '*Woe to him that coveteth an evil coveteousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high,*' and also: '*Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his . . . and to him that ladeth himself with thick clay.*'"

"What!" Madam cried, her face growing fiery. "What is this! Do you quote Scripture at me? Are you mad?" And she pulled upon the bell rope.

Tobiah knew the bell would not be answered and no servant would come to put him forth—Nahum would have seen to that. But had it been otherwise it would have made no difference; when the worthy man had a message to deliver, he delivered it, as we know, notwithstanding bells, servants and interruptions, various and sundry.

He went on now in the words of the prophet Micah: "*Woe unto them that covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away; so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his inheritance.*"

Madam tugged upon the bell furiously. "Go!" she vociferated, half-suffocated with anger and with astonishment that one should dare to so address her. "Go! Do you hear me! Insolence! Mad man! You shall be turned forth!"

"Nay," said Tobiah, "I have yet a warning to deliver to you. '*Thus saith the Lord (Micah ii. 3, 4), against this family do I devise an evil, from which ye shall not remove your necks; neither shall ye go haughtily, for this time is evil. And in that day*'—the day of the Lord's judgment for these past doings—'*one shall say . . . He hath changed the portion of this people . . . turning away he hath divided the fields.*'"

Madam seized Tobiah by the shoulder. He stood before the door, and she came of a stock that was used to laying the yard stick about the ears of apprentices; she would force him from the room or push herself past him without waiting for a servant.

But he stood firm. "As touching the man, Zachary Ward—" he began to say.

Madam cut him short. "I want no word of him!" she cried, her face suffused with crimson and her breath short.

"Nay, there you speak no truth," Tobiah said; "there is a word of him you would, unless I much mistake, be glad enough to hear, to wit—that of his death."

"His death?"

She sat down suddenly, her hands dropped, her eyes fixing Tobiah, her face bluish under the red.

Tobiah looked upon her with strong disapproval. "*Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer,*" he observed, "and he that desireth a man's death is not free of bloodguiltiness."

She did not heed him; indeed, did not hear him. "Dead?" she repeated unsteadily. "Is he dead?"

"Nay," said Tobiah with disgust, "I said no such thing! He is alive and well. I spoke with him not later than this morning."

She stared a moment; then, when she understood, her anger burst forth furiously. Not the less because she had for the minute forgotten herself and all else in the good belief of Zachary's death; perceiving now the mistake, the torrent of her wrath broke forth. Yet with a certain weakness mixed with it—the shock, though for the moment it had seemed good news, had been great, and the disappointment greater. And she, as we know, was one by constitution and habit ill-fitted to sustain such, or to give way to the rage to which she was prone and which now held her. Therefore, though she poured forth invective upon Tobiah and upon Zachary, who she thought had sent him, there was a quavering in her tone now and then, and an impotence about her as she sat in her seat, not attempting again to push the good man from the room, or to call for another to do so.

Tobiah heard her out without answering, only repeating, as to himself, the words of Ecclesiasticus: "*I would rather dwell with a lion, and a dragon than to keep house with a wicked woman,*" and '*As the climbing of a sandy way is to the feet of the aged, so is a wife full of words to a quiet man.*'" Later, when her breath was near spent, he said, "You err in that you hold Zachary Ward bade me hither. It is the Lord that bade me, Zachary was inclined to let be a while, saying, 'I would not shame the woman,' and thinking to give you another chance to repent and restore on your own account. To this end have I come

to you, to give you the chance and bid you make restitution while there is yet time and before compulsion is used."

"What?" she said, and sat up suddenly.

But next moment the fear which had shaken her was gone. "Do you threaten me?" she cried, "you and your rogue companion?"

"Nay," said Tobiah, "I warn you, for the word of the Lord came unto me saying: '*When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him no warning . . . the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thy hand.*' Therefore, and that I may be guiltless in the matter, even though you die in your sins, have I come to warn you and to bid you make restitution of what you wrongly hold."

Madam got to her feet; she swayed a little, but more from a fresh access of anger than from her former weakness.

"Go!" she cried. "Go. Dare to outface me no more!"

Tobiah warded her off, for she seemed as if she would have thrown herself upon him to thrust him forth. "Is that your last word?" he asked.

And when he saw clearly that it was the last, he said: "So be it." Shaking the skirts of his coat as testimony that he was clear in the matter, he took the document from his pocket.

"The will by which your late husband, Roger Zacharius Ward, bequeathed Wythes Hall, with marsh, mere and wood, to his eldest son, Zachary," so he said, unfolding it.

She swayed backward, swaying from it as a tree before a sudden gust of wind. She swayed as if struck in the eyes and tottered a moment, then sank into the chair, her face purple and her eyes staring.

"*'An end, the end is come,'*" said Tobiah, "as saith the Lord in the book of the prophet Ezekiel: '*Now is the end come upon thee, and I will judge thee according to thy ways.*'"

She did not answer, she did not speak or move; but sat,

or rather huddled as she had dropped, her eyes fixed, as fascinated, upon the parchment, her head fallen a little forward, a thin stream of blood beginning to issue from lips and nostrils.

When Tobiah saw the blood he put up the document and went to her.

She made no move; she did not stir or shift, but sat on, motionless, with fallen jaw and wide, protruding eyes.

Tobiah went to the door. "Nahum!" he called, "Nahum! What, Betsy, Moll! Bring Madam's woman here!"

Nahum came running and Tobiah repeated the last to him, bidding him hasten the woman, as Madam was taken with a fit. He himself cut her lace and placed her upon a couch, while the old man fetched female assistance.

Shortly it came, Madam's woman and others. Later, the nearest apothecary hastened thither, fetched by Tobiah's orders. But he was of no avail; none was of any, none could do anything for Madam now. She never stirred nor spoke again; but lay, face deeply purple, eyes round and glazed, speechless and motionless till evening. Then she died, never recovering consciousness or attempting to speak of repentance or remorse or restitution; a woman smitten, while still in her sins, by the sight of that which she deemed lost and which she herself had suppressed that she might fraudulently gain.

"Her blood is upon her own head," said Tobiah, and "The Lord has requited her even as he requited Ahab and his wife Jezebel in the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which they wrongfully took and possessed."

And, leaving Nahum in charge at Wythes Hall, he went to his own house to await the return of Zachary to Colchester.

CHAPTER XX

OF THE LAST GOING TO LOWBOLE

THIS is the account of the death of Thomas Ashe, which Zachary received from the man who was fellow-prisoner with him at Reutzberg.

On the night of May 3 this man—he was one who at different times had been servant to sundry learned, but was then out of employ—on that night he chanced to pass by the Tower, a dismantled stronghold which stands some furlongs to the north of Reutzberg. The place was solitary and somewhat ruinous; he was surprised to see a light shining from a lower window, until he called to mind how he had heard it reported by a peasant that an old student had lately taken up abode there.

There used to be broken masonry upon the ground about the wall; he drew near thinking, being an inquisitive fellow, to mount upon it and look in at the window; but he found it was now gone, so he could not climb up. However, as he approached, which he did quietly upon the grass, he heard a man's voice speaking within.

"As touching the *Spiritus Vini Æthereus*," it said, and some quality in it, for all that it was level and neither angry nor triumphant, made the listener shiver and at the same time held him listening, "as touching that spirit, it is true I have somewhat to say to you."

So the voice said and no one answered it; no other spoke at all. "Nay," it went on, "more than that, I have it, the Spirit itself, to show you. It is here—a quantity, see, no little phial. You shall sample it presently, you shall smell and taste it. But it is not for this alone that I have entreated you to come thus privately to discourse with your former partner. The one for whom you did such service

of old and who, doubtless, you are ready to serve again, albeit his name has passed from the thoughts of men, while yours is famous among the learned. I am sure that you would serve him now as then, and for that reason I was sure that you would come here to him and come as privately as bidden. Had any word of your intent or your coming, you could not so well serve him as you did formerly. Had any knowledge that you came to him they might perchance think that it was from him you learned the sole true and perfect way to prepare the *Spiritus Vini Æthereus*, which achievement will (unless Fate decrees otherwise) doubtless soon after add lustre to your name. There are some few—do you know it?—who whisper that it was from him you learned the secret of the *Ælum Vitrioli Dulce Verum*, although fame ascribes it to your credit solely. The name recalls something to you? You recall how you served your partner at the time when the *Ælum* was making?

“Other matters befell at that time likewise; it is of them I would speak before coming to the *Spiritus Vini Æthereus*. They do not pertain to the Art, nor to learning—trifles merely. They but concern a woman charged with witchcraft and convicted, the wife of one Thomas Ashe—a small matter, no doubt long forgotten. The sentence was not executed, perhaps you remember? For the woman died in prison while the faggots for her burning were still a-piling in the Square of Reutzberg. Do you know how she died, partner of my earlier days?

“Nay, I will not tell you. A man who has loved does not speak of the night of his bridal. God, an there is one, knows it!

“Last year the plague came to Reutzberg: you were not there, Most Learned, but doubtless you heard thereof after. Heard how Burgomaster Van Jout lost his young wife—it was the burgomaster who for lust and foul vengeance set afoot the charge against that other wife. How Jacob, his brother, lost his loved and only son—it was

Jacob who brought to conclusion the charge against that one, the sole and only love of another! Heard how the plague spread all about the Square—it was in the Square where the faggots were piled that day when she died, of whom I have spoken. Heard how the people of Reutzberg died: it was the people of Reutzberg who hounded her to death, who gathered in the Square, thinking to see the execution!

“Do you know how the plague came to Reutzberg, my partner? I will tell you: it came in a phial marked *Ultio*, Revenge—Revenge, my partner.

“A fool, who knew nothing, carried the phial and emptied it where rises the spring which serves the houses of the Van Jouts and some others about the Square. You know where the spring rises without the town? Few do, certainly no stranger could find its head. It was troublesome to make the fool understand how to do so. But it was done and he found it, and the plague went to the Van Jouts in the water. To others who drank from the same source, and from them, by infection, to others who did not drink—there is small check to that enemy once entered within a beleaguered town.

“And who sent it? One, Thomas Ashe. He gave laborious days, nay, years, to find some *Ultio*. And this that he found was difficult in the preparing; aye, and dangerous too, for it was the quintessence of the plague, the living spirit of the infection, gathered as it were from death itself, and prepared after trial and experiment, perfected and put into a bottle—a little bottle. Death in a bottle, my partner; death and infection that, released, spreads over all a town as a cloud spreads in still weather.

“So Reutzberg paid.

“But you were not in Reutzberg then, you, who were partner with me what time this witch trial happened. You remember you were partner then? It was but a little while after the *Ælum Vitrioli* was first perfectly prepared—by me, not by you, Learned. We can be honest, we are alone, we know who accomplished it—and who stole it when ac-

complished. You gave testimony at the trial ; in public, and also in private. You knew me and you knew her, more intimately than another ; you knew us and our doings and sayings ; you could speak of us, and you did. You were accounted learned and of good repute, what you said would carry weight, and you said it. You gave testimony in public and also to the Van Jouts and others in private, and the private counted more even than the other.

"What? Is there somewhat you would mention? Nay, save it. I thought maybe you might have something to say before I had finished, and I would sooner finish first—that is why I placed you so that you could best listen. I have nearly done now, I have but one thing more to say—

"I know the testimony you gave in private."

The voice stopped. But there was no answer, only in the silence a small writhing, rustling sound, as of one stirring a little upon a stone floor.

The listener pressed close against the wall and shivered. He did not know whether he listened to a madman alone who spoke to the figments of his own imagining, or to one who addressed a living being who did not, or could not, answer him. To either he spoke terrible words of terrible things: but more than the words, in the tone, in the very air, terror hung. The listener felt it and pressed close to the wall in the shadow. As he did so one within moved; he heard a man's step across the flagged floor, and at the same time another sound, as some one stirring as if he twisted in straight bands. Some other was there! It was no madman that spoke alone of wrongs received and awfully paid! There were two shut within the solitary place! Here and now some terrible thing was being done!

He gripped the wall and, in gripping, found a small projection. Quickly he raised himself on it, precariously but quietly mounting; laying hold of the stone window sill, he managed just to look in through the small aperture.

Within he saw the bare room, not furnished with any books or appliances of the Art, nothing that savoured of that but one flask, closely stoppered and holding clear

liquid. There was a large fire upon the hearth, kindled doubtless to act as a beacon for the man who had been bidden hither; beyond that nothing but bare walls and bare floor, and the two who were there—one, who stood, a man of mask-like face and whitened hair and fine, fine hands: the other who lay upon the floor, bound and gagged, unable to speak, almost unable to move—the learned Schleger, ornament of the Schools!

At the sight the watcher almost cried out; but not quite; something tied his tongue and made it cleave to the roof of his mouth. Something there was about the man who bent to unbind the mouth of the other, something soft but deadly in his tone, as he said—

“It is for the testimony that you gave these years ago that I have entreated you here, my partner. It is for what you then did for me and mine that I give you the *Spiritus Vini Æthereus*; it is but a small payment.”

The gag was taken from the other’s mouth; and bruised and bleeding though his lips were, he managed to find voice.

“Ashe!” he gasped, “mercy!”

Mercy! Is there mercy in stone walls? Is there mercy in Fate? Sooner in either than in this one.

He did not answer at all, but opened the close-stoppered flask. Slowly and steadily he poured the clear liquid upon the face of the other—upon bruised lips and dilating nostrils. It trickled into the mouth, down the throat, about the neck, the ears, the nose; the very hair was wet with the rare spirit thus poured forth; the only of the Ethereal Spirit in the world, poured out by him who had made it.

The bound man writhed horribly; he lay close to the hearth, he writhed till his hand almost touched the embers. He cried out once, a gasping cry, choked as the liquid ran into his mouth; then he began to pant and gurgle as one drowning or fighting for breath when choking. In the air there began to be a sweet smell as of true marjoram.

And while he still gasped, and while the watcher was

still held speechless and spellbound—indeed, the whole took a strangely little time in the doing—an awful thing happened. A flame suddenly shot forth from the hearth and licked across the room on the floor level, a flaming eddy as if the lower air fired—then a violent report and all was obliterated.

The watcher by the window was pushed backwards, the hot blast smiting him like a power invisible. He fell upon his back among nettles, rubbish and fragments of masonry, shaken, like himself, from the old structure falling about him. One piece struck him upon the temple and stretched him senseless. Long he lay so.

When he came to himself, an hour or more later, all was dark and quiet. The fire was out—there was little in the bare room on which it could take hold when once the inflammable gas or liquid was expended. The roof arch had fallen in, the two who had been there were crushed beneath it; or, rather, what remained of them buried, death having come to them by fire and by the stifling breath of the potent spirit. Of this he was assured; though he probably assured himself on another occasion, if he did at all, for on that one, and as soon as he was sufficiently master of himself to stand, he made off as fast as he could from the spot where this thing had happened.

One cannot altogether blame him, a man at once ignorant and enough mixed with the learned to fear them; one understands that he found this terrible even above another's finding; terrible and mysterious too and the work of awful powers. He spoke to no one of what he had seen. How could he tell that by speaking he would not draw upon himself some strange vengeance? Also, who would believe his report? Who believe the tale of how the plague came to Reutzberg, or that the air in a room caught fire and the stone arch was shaken to ruin by some power invisible, crushing beneath it the terrible unknown master and his victim? Rather, he himself might be held guilty of concern in the disappearance of the learned Schleger, did he so much as mention him. So he said

nothing and avoided the company of all learned, having conceived a very lively fear for the whole body of them.

But some while on in the summer, being still out of employment and driven to theft by necessity, he got himself into trouble and so to prison, where in time he met with Zachary Ward. And to him, by deft questioning, he was induced to tell the tale above set down. And Zachary, from what he had found previously and what he guessed and what he afterwards proved, held it to be true.

This then, this account of Ashe's death, Zachary gave to Keren; and with it what he must of her mother's death and what then befell. He wrote it, for it seemed to him better than to speak; he shrank from telling it to the daughter of the two. So he wrote, as briefly as he could, though that was of necessity not brief; prompted to it, not more by his promise than by his respect for Keren's power to learn things and to come at them in the end, with help from outside or without it. Even when the letter was written and gone to the place of its direction, he, as we have seen, thought once of recovering it, and perhaps holding it back if he could do so.

But he could not, it had gone from Colchester before he reached there. My lady, having occasion for certain furs and other matters which she had left there, sent word for one to ride with them to London; and that one bore with him the letter which had come for Keren. This on the day when Zachary came to Tobiah, the man leaving the town in the morning and Zachary reaching it in the evening.

It was not till the evening of the next day that Keren received the letter, for, owing to the rains, the roads were very bad, the country in places flooded, and travelling slow. In consequence the man took two full days upon the journey. (Zachary, who started a day later, accomplished it in a day and a half; but he was in haste to follow his letter and not backward in spending himself and the money he had borrowed from Tobiah to do it. Even then he did

not come to London until Keren had left, and so must go on again after—but of that later.)

Keren had already retired on the night that the letter was brought to town: but thinking she might not yet be in bed, one carried it to her. She read it standing by her bedside. The snuff of the candle grew heavy and the wick long before she had done reading, although, I think she only read once how Thomas Ashe died and how his wife did; the story of a great love and a great hate, a great hurt—the greatest, almost, that a man can receive—and a terrible vengeance taken. To the end she read, and afterwards stood a long while without moving. Slowly she had read it and slowly she took it in, made it a part of herself; slowly fitted it to what she knew, what she dimly remembered, and what felt in that strange way we feel things which are not ours and yet are, the past in which we have no part but which has part in us.

For long she stood, the letter still in her hand, but her eyes not upon it, not upon anything. Aware of nothing really till the candle, now burnt low, flickered and went out. Then she moved, and, beginning to shiver in all her flesh, crept into bed in the dark.

In the morning she went to Lady Belton while she sipped her chocolate.

“My lady,” she said, “I must go to Lowbole.”

“Where?” the lady said, hardly hearing: but something in Keren’s face arrested her. “You have news?” she asked; “you have a letter?”

“Yes,” Keren answered; “my father is dead. It is for that reason I must go to Lowbole; there is something to be done there.”

“Oh, my dear!” Lady Belton cried, and folded her in her arms.

The kind creature spoke many words of gentle sympathy and comforting assurance; and later began to say what must be done; to speak of mourning garments, of relatives, of waiting the return of Zachary Ward, and kindred things.

Keren heard her and answered as she should, but after-

wards repeated that she must go to Lowbole—now—to-day. There was that she had to do.

Lady Belton exclaimed: "But, child! The roads, the weather! You cannot go! You must wait Mr. Ward—some one! You cannot go alone!"

Keren explained, with the patience of one preoccupied and having no expectation of making the other understand, that she must go—she could go in this weather and she could go alone. It is possible she a little wished she had followed her instinct and set out alone and early without warning any one, only leaving word that she was gone. But gratitude and affection for Lady Belton forbade that and, besides, these expostulations did not really matter or hinder, any more than did difficulties of the way, bad roads or weather. Shortly she would go, there was never any doubt about it.

And she went, though not alone—Mrs. Burgess, the housekeeper, a discreet woman, went with her. My lady was desirous to send to her brother's lodging to request his escort as well, but Keren would not have it. For the rest, she accepted arrangements made and held necessary, though they fitted little with her earlier experience. There are rules and customs of class beside which the laws of the Medes and Persians are pliant; no wise one attempts to thwart them, only when the time comes evades them.

Betimes they started, escorted by two respectable and sturdy men, and mounted; the roads, once beyond London, would be too heavy for travelling otherwise. The rain had ceased by that time and the clouds, which had wept their fill the past week, promised to hold up; but the ways, even in the town, were very miry. Outside they were much worse, deep in mud, running with water in many places, and in the open land beyond the suburbs all but merged in the general quag. The flats about Wanstead were found impassable, and it was necessary to go some miles out of the way to avoid them; the river, too, was in flood, and every stream as well; there was no fording or crossing except at bridges, and by no means by all of these with safety.

In the Forest district conditions were worse, for the roads, less frequented, were less repaired. Here the horses floundered in pools or deep drifts of sodden leaves that spread all across the way; and often slipped on slime and wet clay, or stumbled on branches broken in the recent gales and left encumbering the ground.

However, the journey was accomplished without misadventure, and by mid-afternoon they came to *The Roebuck*, that grey inn which stands above Broken Hill with the Forest about it, except at the back where the land falls away to the more fertile river valley. Here Keren gave the word to halt, and they halted, nothing loth. Mrs. Burgess, who was mounted behind the younger man and had not liked the ride, was especially satisfied to stop.

But her satisfaction was a little disturbed when, a short time after the dismounting, Keren came to her; or rather paused on her way downstairs to look in at the room where she refreshed herself. Keren had changed her gown and now wore the homely one and the heavy shoes she had worn when she left Lowbole; she had brought them with her to-day and had put them on and eaten some simple food the while. The comfortable meal ordered by Mrs. Burgess was not yet ready to be served nor she herself much more than uncloaked when Keren looked in, pausing as it were for a moment in passing.

"I am going forth," she said; "you will wait here."

"Ma'am?" Mrs. Burgess queried, hardly understanding.

"I am going," Keren said; and then was gone without waiting.

Downstairs she went and out; across the yard, across the sodden grass beyond, across the bad road that dipped downhill to a quag at the bottom, and into the Forest.

The trees closed behind her—yellow trees; all that now bore leaves were yellow, some russet, but most in their wetness very golden. Underfoot the ground was gold, below as well as above, and all around—all gold, except where black earth showed through or pools of water shone darkly. Tree-trunks were almost black from the long rain and the

branches too, a network plainly visible through the thin leaves, all still in the windless air. All very still, and the dampness very full of tree-breath and the smell and feel of the woods and their dying. She left the path, a thread-like track with tufts of yellow bracken standing above the black water which lay upon it, and bore away to the right among oaks and birches and tangles of sodden blackberries. Here and there a red leaf of bramble started out from the prevailing yellow; here and there a toadstool, red or white or rare violet, showed, growing on rotten wood or earth bank, swept clear of leaves by recent winds now spent. There was no wind now, the air was motionless, still and moist, the smell of toadstools hanging in it and the fragrance of oak leaves. Nothing moved, neither bird nor beast nor insect creature; only sometimes water drops fell from ends of branches, and leaves, heavy with the recent rains, drifted noiselessly down to their fallen fellows. In all the silence there was nothing that moved, nothing that seemed to live; only Keren, who went through the dying woods to a goal deep in the heart of them.

The beeches at Lowbole had been torn in the recent gales: broken limbs lay across the doorway, deep drifts of leaves were piled upon steps and window-ledges, and upon the roof were branch ends and fragments. From the corners of the thatch the water still dropped and trickled slowly, falling upon the flags with a sound very audible in the stillness. All the doors were shut, all the windows looked out blankly; a dark house, it was, and very secret when Keren came to it in the twilight.

She came past the trees and up the pathway. Past the front of the house, where damp showed a stain almost black on the wall face. At the back torn thatch and tiling and broken things were heaped in corners. In the orchard the apples lay scattered, one old tree broken and uprooted; across the well top a branch held the windlass imprisoned. She felt for the loose brick beside it and drew out the key from under. She held it up; in the failing light it showed rusty, with water from its damp hiding-place still

upon it. Nevertheless, she managed to use it; with an effort she opened the door and went in, shutting it after.

The smell of the house met her as she entered, and the feel of it: the feel of waiting alone here in the Forest, waiting in the twilight for something. It was almost dark within, day seemed to have already departed; but she knew her way and was not hindered. She went by the kitchen passage to the hall place, past the corner of the awkward stairs and the clock long silent—everything silent, no draught of wind, no creak of timber or sound of mouse or any living creature. The mice were gone, and the rats, they had gone from here ready.

She went to the dining-parlour. The figures on the tapestry showed but faintly, only the palor of the faces, and that dim from the dust upon them—in the fast falling darkness ghosts of ghosts, and those sinking into the universal shadow. She opened the door at the far end and went by the long passage to the stone room.

Here it was somewhat lighter, for though the windows were small, there were several of them and they were high and so a little above the densest of the shade cast by the surrounding Forest. A grey, pale light lingered here, a shadowless light, pale and cold as the ashes of yesterday, that showed things in the centre and left the far corners to the gloom which lay there, but was imperceptibly spreading. All in the room was as it had been left: cold furnaces, dead fires, piled apparatus, ranged bottles—two small bottles marked *Ultio*, on a high ledge alone, the ledge where once had also stood a love philtre that one had thrown away. Very long ago that was, so long that she had forgotten all that went to the doing of it, almost forgotten about it. She crossed the room, hardly disturbing the silence, a silence unbroken by any purring and bubbling of things that boiled or matured. All was still now; the spirit that had informed it had fled; only something terrible remained.

There were some books within a press. Not many, Ashe had studied few of the works of other adepts and had never made a record of his own operations. There was Paracelsus'

Book of Long Life and Concerning the Nature of Things, a mathematical treatise of Dee's, and Roger Bacon's *Mirror of Alchemy*, no more. She took them from the press and carried them away, going out by the outer door and bearing them to the foot of the first beech tree; there she put them upon the heaped leaves.

It was darker outside than within in the dense shade of the encompassing Forest. Damp was rising from the ground and exhaling from the trees and drenched bracken beneath them. Between the trunks it showed a misty whiteness and crept forth, touching her face and hair, a tangible presence, as hands, clammy but gentle, that would draw her to it, to the woods where the gold was fast merging in darkness.

She went back into the house and shut the door.

From the kitchen she fetched wood—dry wood and tinder laid up in the time of her ordering. By armfuls she brought it and by basketfuls, load after load, all there was to carry, to the stone room. And as if that were not enough, she fetched stools and small chairs from the kitchen and dining-parlour, and wrenched the legs from them or broke them as her strength allowed and she could find any tool to do it. Then she made a fire on the old hearth in the stone room, the big one with the canopy above it.

It was quite dark by the time she had it burning; there was no light in the room but the licking flames, which sent wavering glows across the floor and woke yellow glints, like eyes, in alembics and bottles. All else was gloom and one deeper shadow, the shadow of herself, stooping darkly over.

She began to take bottles from the shelves, those containing oils and spirits and fiery essences. She carried them outside, a dozen or more of them, ranging them upon the ground, near to the stem of the rose tree by the door lintel. Two, however, she reserved, two large ones, setting them upon a table within, and with them the phials marked *Ultio*. Then she set to building up the fire, with the skill of which she was master. She built it high, high into the

chimney, higher than had ever before been piled there in the years the house had been standing. But that did not exhaust the fuel she had brought; she still had plenty, and with it she built outwards from the flat hearthstone, spreading towards the centre of the room, towards the table and the old presses. She built deftly, as one who understands such building; and it is to be noted that she had for this second purpose reserved some of the best of the fuel and the driest of the faggots and tinder. Carefully she led the fire from the glowing hearth to the second heap in the centre by a train of matchwood and inflammable powder; then she set wide the doors to improve the draught, and waited. Only for a little; almost at once the faggots caught, the flames ran upwards, the whole heap was kindled, as if the first fire had overflowed its boundaries. Smoke rose from it, within the confining walls very choking, while the roaring and snapping at these close quarters was awing. She did not heed either; she took a bottle from the table and cast it in. It broke upon the hearthstone, the liquor running about, some in runnels among the flags, some spreading upon the hot stones and vanishing from them as water vanishes in dry weather, catching fire mysteriously when in invisible vapour. She flung another bottle after, one containing naphtha, this to the fire under the chimney. It broke almost in falling, the oil bursting into flames at the breaking with a sound like an explosion. A flame leapt up, hiding the hearth and the chimney and, surging outwards for a moment, shot across the room, lighting all terribly and catching the top of the piled wood in the centre. She gave back before the blast of it; but quickly recovered, and covering her mouth from the black smoke that poured forth, drew near again and cast in another bottle—one marked *Ultio*; and, with it, the other.

Into the centre of the fire she threw them, hearing through the roar the sound of their falling. Each fell and broke or burst; in the hot glow she saw them; saw for a moment the glow slacken under the chill of what was in them, as embers slacken when a drop of water is poured

on them. Then the flames quivered and waxed again, and the dark places, wounds made by this deadly secret, grew rosy: *Ultio* was gone for ever.

The fire burned up again: high it burned, great flames that leaped up the chimney, that, crackling, shot through the piled wood in the centre of the room, that caught the tables and presses, that mounted to the stone arch above, and ran about the floor beneath, where liquid lay in dark pools which caught and burned, each pool a separate conflagration. She was driven back before it, forced by the heat and suffocating smoke outside the doorway. There she remained, watching; ever and anon, as she was able, leaning in to throw a bottle from those she had ready, to the fire. She threw all, one after another; covering her mouth and throwing blindly in the smother; but not missing aim. All found goal in the great fire: oils, spirits, inflammable liquors; each, at its casting, adding to the heat and flame and roaring—the works of the master adding to the force that was loosed to destruction where he had worked to destroy, all hastening the end that was coming.

In the forest Zachary heard the roar of the fire far off and, before he could see the house of Lowbole through the intervening trees, he saw the glow from it, a blade of vivid light which cut the darkness. Swiftly and more swiftly he made towards it, stumbling over roots and splashing through water. More swiftly still when, clear of the growth, he saw the house—the leaping light at the stone room windows and the open doorway, as the door of a furnace, with a dark figure that stood in it.

“Keren!” he cried, and he fled across the intervening open space, “Keren!”

She looked round. “You?” she said, and then: “It is the end.”

“Yes,” he answered, and for a moment stood beside her—stood while the arch above cracked and the heat from the fire scorched their clothing and some element in a closed vessel far in a corner exploded sharply. “The end,” he said. “The end here. But after?—After?”

She wavered; on a sudden uncertainty seemed to have come to her. "I don't know," she said unsteadily.

But he did: he took her by the hand and led her out.

That night the moon rose clear: it was in the third quarter. And the next day there was sun, and the next and the day after; very beautiful, the wet earth shining as one who rejoices after tears, the air most damply fragrant, mild and gentle.

On the third evening at twilight—there was a touch of frost that twilight, the crispness which makes a man think pleasantly of the fireside and lit windows showing in the dusk—that evening, as Tobiah was about to take light from the hearth to kindle a candle, there came a knocking at the door. Opening it, he saw, standing upon the threshold, Zachary Ward and Keren, bearing sundry books of alchemy with them.

"Friend, will you marry us?" Zachary said.

And Tobiah, regarding them, perceived the cause was from the Lord. "Most certainly," said he.

Nevertheless, later he said: "We will have another ceremony as well, some form and mummary prescribed by church and law; one must make assurance sure when there is an inheritance."

And when Keren looked inquiry he said: "Without doubt an inheritance—Wythes Hall is his already."

"Madam is dead," he explained to Zachary. "She was buried to-day, few attending, her daughter declining to come from Chelmsford when she heard that you were in possession. You were as good as already so, must arrive in a little and should have been there already, had you done your duty. The whole is yours, and the sooner you are both there the better, for though, under the Lord, I have been called to be that Providence which takes care for drunken men and fools, I will not continually act as nursing mother for you."

But they did not go to Wythes Hall immediately, for

Zachary said, "To-morrow," and to Keren: "I would have you first come there at twilight when the rooks fly home to the elms by the wood border and the birds talk in the marsh and among the mere sedges, and the poplar leaves—they will be fallen now and smelling strongly—rustle in the last breeze, and lights begin to twinkle in the house-front which looks towards the water. That is the time to return after long wandering; that time to-morrow we will home together."

And so they did, that night abiding with Tobiah, their good friend and partner in some adventuring, as well as godly admonisher. And at bedtime he gave them blessing—

"The Lord bless you and keep you, and lift up the light of His countenance upon you and give you peace. The Lord hear you in the day of trouble, the name of the God of Jacob defend you; send you help from the sanctuary and strengthen you out of Zion; grant you according to your heart's desire and fulfil all your counsel."

NOTE ON THE *SPIRITUS VINI ÆTHEREUS*, *ULTIO* AND THE BLUE STONE

The *Spiritus Vini Æthereus* prepared by Ashe was the ether of modern medicine, an account of which was first published in 1741, as quoted in Chapter IV, but which was known and made earlier.

The stuff to which Ashe gave the name of *Ultio* was the bacteria of plague. For at least 50 years before his time it was known that there was a separate and material, although invisible, source of the disease which could be stored up, handed on or conveyed in water, materials, etc. There is no record that any one isolated or used any of it: in doing so Ashe was in advance of his time, though he, like the rest of his generation, had no idea that he was dealing with a germ or living organism.

The "Blue Stone" made by Keren was synthetic lapis lazuli, now known commercially as artificial ultra marine and prepared by a process not very dissimilar from the one here described. The author has made a very small quantity by the method Keren followed. There is no record of its having been known to the Alchemists, but it is not improbable, the operation is one after their taste and the record of their doings is very incomplete.

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